Designing Microcontroller Systems for Electrically Noisy Environments

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Digital circuits are often thought of as being immune to noise problems, but really they're not. Noises in digital systems produce software upsets: program jumps to apparently random locations in memory. Noise-induced glitches in the signal lines can cause such problems, but the supply voltage is more sensitive to glitches than the signal lines.

Severe noise conditions, those involving electrostatic discharges, or as found in automotive environments, can do permanent damage to the hardware. Electrostatic discharges can blow a crater in the silicon. In the automotive environment, in ordinary operation, the "12V" power line can shown + and −400V transients.

This Application Note describes some electrical noises and noise environments. Design considerations, along the lines of PCB layout, power supply distribution and decoupling, and shielding and grounding techniques, that may help minimize noise susceptibility are reviewed. Special attention is given to the automotive and ESD environments.

Symptoms of Noise Problems

Noise problems are not usually encountered during the development phase of a microcontroller system. This is because benches rarely simulate the system's intended environment. Noise problems tend not to show up until the system is installed and operating in its intended environment. Then, after a few minutes or hours of normal operation the system finds itself someplace out in left field. Inputs are ignored and outputs are gibberish. The system may respond to a reset, or it may have to be turned off physically and then back on again, at which point it commences operating as though nothing had happened. There may be an obvious cause, such as an electrostatic discharge from somebody's finger to a keyboard or the upset occurs every time a copier machine is turned on or off. Or there may be no obvious cause, and nothing the operator can do will make the upset repeat itself. But a few minutes, or a few hours, or a few days later it happens again.

One symptom of electrical noise problems is randomness, both in the occurrence of the problem and in what the system does in its failure. All operational upsets that occur at seemingly random intervals are not necessarily caused by noise in the system. Marginal VCC, inadequate decoupling, rarely encountered software conditions, or timing coincidences can produce upsets that seem to occur randomly. On the other hand, some noise sources can produce upsets downright periodically. Nevertheless, the more difficult it is to characterize an upset as to cause and effect, the more likely it is to be a noise problem.

Types and Sources of Electrical Noise

The name given to electrical noises other than those that are inherent in the circuit components (such as thermal noise) is EMI: electromagnetic interference. Motors, power switches, fluorescent lights, electrostatic discharges, etc., are sources of EMI. There is a veritable alphabet soup of EMI types, and these are briefly described below.

SUPPLY LINE TRANSIENTS

Anything that switches heavy current loads onto or off of AC or DC power lines will cause large transients in these power lines. Switching an electric typewriter on or off, for example, can put a 1000V spike onto the AC power lines.

The basic mechanism behind supply line transients is shown in Figure 1. The battery represents any power source, AC or DC. The coils represent the line inductance between the power source and the switchable loads R1 and R2. If both loads are drawing current, the line current flowing through the line inductance establishes a magnetic field of some value. Then, when one of the loads is switched off, the field due to that component of the line current collapses, generating transient voltages, $v = L(di/dt)$, which try to maintain the current at its original level. That's called an "inductive kick." Because of contact bounce, transients are generated whether the switch is being opened or closed, but they're worse when the switch is being opened.

An inductive kick of one type or another is involved in most line transients, including those found in the automotive environment. Other mechanisms for line transients exist, involving noise pickup on the lines. The noise voltages are then conducted to a susceptible circuit right along with the power.

EMP AND RFI

Anything that produces arcs or sparks will radiate electromagnetic pulses (EMP) or radio-frequency interference (RFI).
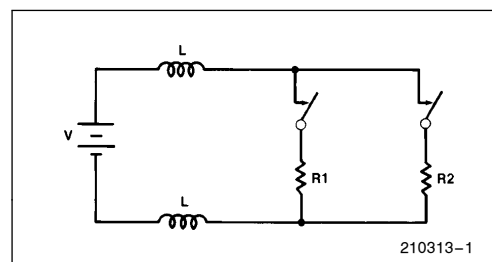

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Figure 1. Supply Line Transients

Spark discharges have probably caused more software upsets in digital equipment than any other single noise source. The upsetting mechanism is the EMP produced by the spark. The EMP induces transients in the circuit, which are what actually cause the upset.

Arcs and sparks occur in automotive ignition systems, electric motors, switches, static discharges, etc. Electric motors that have commutator bars produce an arc as the brushes pass from one bar to the next. DC motors and the "universal" (AC/DC) motors that are used to power hand tools are the kinds that have commutator bars. In switches, the same inductive kick that puts transients on the supply lines will cause an opening or closing switch to throw a spark.

ESD

Electrostatic discharge (ESD) is the spark that occurs when a person picks up a static charge from walking across a carpet, and then discharges it into a keyboard, or whatever else can be touched. Walking across a carpet in a dry climate, a person can accumulate a static voltage of 35kV. The current pulse from an electrostatic discharge has an extremely fast risetime — typically, 4A/ns. Figure 2 shows ESD waveforms that have been observed by some investigators of ESD phenomena.

It is enlightening to calculate the L(di/dt) voltage required to drive an ESD current pulse through a couple of inches of straight wire. Two inches of straight wire has about 50 nH of inductance. That's not very much, but using 50 nH for L and 4A/ns for di/dt gives an L(di/dt) drop of about 200V. Recent observations by W.M. King suggest even faster risetimes (Figure 2b) and the occurrence of multiple discharges during a single discharge event.

Obviously, ESD-sensitivity needs to be considered in the design of equipment that is going to be subjected to it, such as office equipment.

GROUND NOISE

Currents in ground lines are another source of noise. These can be 60 Hz currents from the power lines, or RF hash, or crosstalk from other signals that are sharing this particular wire as a signal return line. Noise in the ground lines is often referred to as a "ground loop" problem. The basic concept of the ground loop is shown in Figure 3. The problem is that true earth-ground is not really at the same potential in all locations. If the two ends of a wire are earth-grounded at different locations, the voltage difference between the two "ground" points can drive significant currents (several amperes) through the wire. Consider the wire to be part of a loop which contains, in addition to the wire, a voltage source that represents the difference in potential between the two ground points, and you have

the classical "ground loop." By extension, the term is used to refer to any unwanted (and often unexpected) currents in a ground line.

"Radiated" and "Conducted" Noise

Radiated noise is noise that arrives at the victim circuit in the form of electromagnetic radiation, such as EMP and RFI. It causes trouble by inducing extraneous voltages in the circuit. Conducted noise is noise that arrives at the victim circuit already in the form of an extraneous voltage, typically via the AC or DC power lines.

One defends against radiated noise by care in designing layouts and the use of effective shielding techniques. One defends against conducted noise with filters and
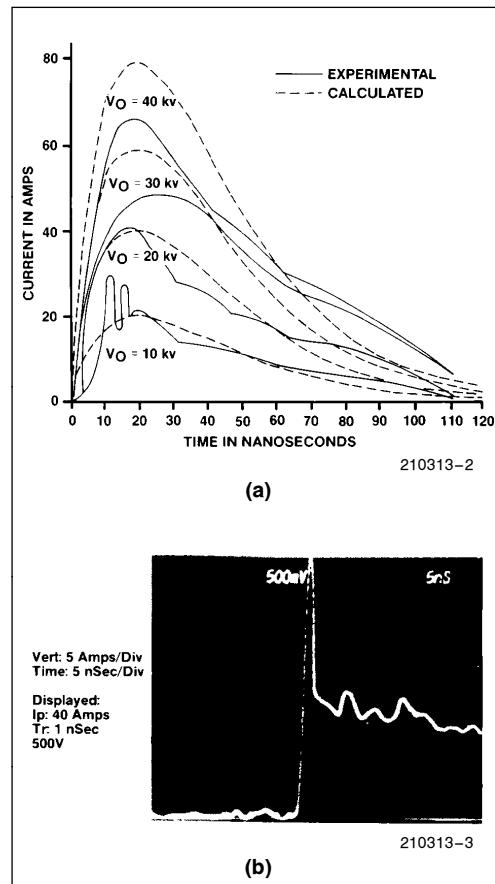
Figure 2. Waveforms of Electrostatic Discharge Currents From a Hand-Held Metallic Object

suppressors, although layouts and grounding techniques are important here, too.

Simulating the Environment

Addressing noise problems after the design of a system has been completed is an expensive proposition. The ill will generated by failures in the field is not cheap either. It's cheaper in the long run to invest a little time and money in learning about noise and noise simulation equipment, so that controlled tests can be made on the bench as the design is developing.

Simulating the intended noise environment is a two-step process: First you have to recognize what the noise environment is, that is, you have to know what kinds of electrical noises are present, and which of them are going to cause trouble. Don't ignore this first step, because it's important. If you invest in an induction coil spark generator just because your application is automotive, you'll be straining at the gnat and swallowing the camel. Spark plug noise is the least of your worries in that environment.

The second step is to generate the electrical noise in a controlled manner. This is usually more difficult than first imagined; one first imagines the simulation in terms of a waveform generator and a few spare parts, and then finds that a wideband power amplifier with a 200V dynamic range is also required. A good source of information on who supplies what noise-simulating equipment is the 1981 "ITEM" Directory and Design Guide (Reference 6).

Types of Failures and Failure Mechanisms

A major problem that EMI can cause in digital systems is intermittent operational malfunction. These software upsets occur when the system is in operation at the time an EMI source is activated, and are usually characterized by a loss of information or a jump in the execution of the program to some random location in memory. The person who has to iron out such problems is tempted to say the program counter went crazy. There is usually no damage to the hardware, and normal operation can resume as soon as the EMI has passed or the source is de-activated. Resuming normal operation usually requires manual or automatic reset, and possibly re-entering of lost information.

Electrostatic discharges from operating personnel can cause not only software upsets, but also permanent ("hard") damage to the system. For this to happen the system doesn't even have to be in operation. Sometimes the permanent damage is latent, meaning the initial damage may be marginal and require further aggravation through operating stress and time before permanent failure takes place. Sometimes too the damage is hidden.

One ESD-related failure mechanism that has been identified has to do with the bias voltage on the substrate of the chip. On some CPU chips the substrate is held at $-2.5V$ by a phase-shift oscillator working into a capacitor/diode clamping circuit. This is called a "charge pump" in chip-design circles. If the substrate wanders too far in either direction, program read errors are noted. Some designs have been known to allow electrostatic discharge currents to flow directly into port pins of an 8048. The resulting damage to the oxide causes an increase in leakage current, which loads down the charge pump, reducing the substrate voltage to a marginal or unacceptable level. The system is then unreliable or completely inoperative until the CPU chip is replaced. But if the CPU chip was subjected to a discharge spark once, it will eventually happen again.

Chips that have a grounded substrate, such as the 8748, can sometimes sustain some oxide damage without actually becoming inoperative. In this case the damage is present, and the increased leakage current is noted; however, since the substrate voltage retains its design value, the damage is largely hidden.
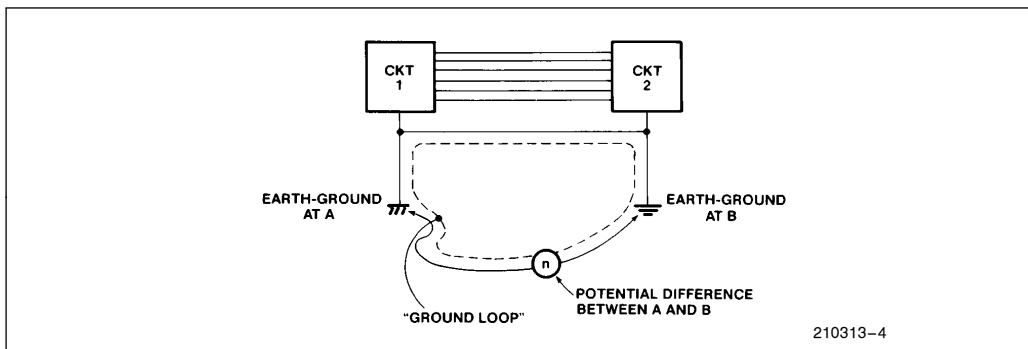

Figure 3. What a Ground Loop Is

It must therefore be recognized that connecting port pins unprotected to a keyboard or to anything else that is subject to electrostatic discharges, makes an extremely dangerous configuration. It doesn't make any difference what CPU chip is being used, or who makes it. If it connects unprotected to a keyboard, it will eventually be destroyed. Designing for an ESD-environment will be discussed further on.

We might note here that MOS chips are not the only components that are susceptible to permanent ESD damage. Bipolar and linear chips can also be damaged in this way. PN junctions are subject to a hard failure mechanism called thermal secondary breakdown, in which a current spike, such as from an electrostatic discharge, causes microscopically localized spots in the junction to approach melt temperatures. Low power TTL chips are subject to this type of damage, as are op-amps. Op-amps, in addition, often carry on-chip MOS capacitors which are directly across an external pin combination, and these are susceptible to dielectric breakdown.

We return now to the subject of software upsets. Noise transients can upset the chip through any pin, even an output pin, because every pin on the chip connects to the substrate through a pn junction. However, the most vulnerable pin is probably the VCC line, since it has direct access to all parts of the chip: every register, gate, flip-flop and buffer.

The menu of possible upset mechanisms is quite lengthy. A transient on the substrate at the wrong time will generally cause a program read error. A false level at a control input can cause an extraneous or misdirected opcode fetch. A disturbance on the supply line can flip a bit in the program counter or instruction register. A short interruption or reversal of polarity on the supply line can actually turn the processor off, but not long enough for the power-up reset capacitor to discharge. Thus when the transient ends, the chip starts up again without a reset.

A common failure mode is for the processor to lock itself into a tight loop. Here it may be executing the data in a table, or the program counter may have jumped a notch, so that the processor is now executing operands instead of opcodes, or it may be trying to fetch opcodes from a nonexistent external program memory.

It should be emphasized that mechanisms for upsets have to do with the arrival of noise-induced transients at the pins of the chips, rather than with the generation of noise pulses within the chip itself, that is, it's not the chip that is picking up noise, it's the circuit.

The Game Plan

Prevention is usually cheaper than suppression, so first we'll consider some preventive methods that might help

to minimize the generation of noise voltages in the circuit. These methods involve grounding, shielding, and wiring techniques that are directed toward the mechanisms by which noise voltages are generated in the circuit. We'll also discuss methods of decoupling. Then we'll look at some schemes for making a graceful recovery from upsets that occur in spite of preventive measures. Lastly, we'll take another look at two special problem areas: electrostatic discharges and the automotive environment.

Current Loops

The first thing most people learn about electricity is that current won't flow unless it can flow in a closed loop. This simple fact is sometimes temporarily forgotten by the overworked engineer who has spent the past several years mastering the intricacies of the DO loop, the timing loop, the feedback loop, and maybe even the ground loop. The simple current loop probably owes its apparent demise to the invention of the ground symbol. By a stroke of the pen one avoids having to draw the return paths of most of the current loops in the circuit. Then "ground" turns into an infinite current sink, so that any current that flows into it is gone and forgotten. Forgotten it may be, but it's not gone. It must return to its source, so that its path will by all the laws of nature form a closed loop.

The physical geometry of a given current loop is the key to why it generates EMI, why it's susceptible to EMI, and how to shield it. Specifically, it's the area of the loop that matters.

Any flow of current generates a magnetic field whose intensity varies inversely to the distance from the wire that carries the current. Two parallel wires conducting currents $+I$ and $-I$ (as in signal feed and return lines) would generate a nonzero magnetic field near the wires, where the distance from a given point to one wire is noticeably different from the distance to the other wire, but farther away (relative to the wire spacing), where the distances from a given point to either wire are about the same, the fields from both wires tend to cancel out. Thus, maintaining proximity between feed and return paths is an important way to minimize their interference with other signals. The way to maintain their proximity is essentially to minimize their loop area. And, because the mutual inductance from current loop A to current loop B is the same as the mutual inductance from current loop B to current loop A, a circuit that doesn't radiate interference doesn't receive it either.

Thus, from the standpoint of reducing both generation of EMI and susceptibility to EMI, the hard rule is to keep loop areas small. To say that loop areas should be minimized is the same as saying the circuit inductance

should be minimized. Inductance is by definition the constant of proportionality between current and the magnetic field it produces: $\phi = LI$. Holding the feed and return wires close together so as to promote field cancellation can be described either as minimizing the loop area or as minimizing L. It's the same thing.

Shielding

There are three basic kinds of shields: shielding against capacitive coupling, shielding against inductive coupling, and RF shielding. Capacitive coupling is electric field coupling, so shielding against it amounts to shielding against electric fields. As will be seen, this is relatively easy. Inductive coupling is magnetic field coupling, so shielding against it is shielding against magnetic fields. This is a little more difficult. Strangely enough, this type of shielding does not in general involve the use of magnetic materials. RF shielding, the classical "metallic barrier" against all sorts of electromagnetic fields, is what most people picture when they think about shielding. Its effectiveness depends partly on the selection of the shielding material, but mostly, as it turns out, on the treatment of its seams and the geometry of its openings.

SHIELDING AGAINST CAPACITIVE COUPLING

Capacitive coupling involves the passage of interfering signals through mutual or stray capacitances that aren't shown on the circuit diagram, but which the experienced engineer knows are there. Capacitive coupling to one's body is what would cause an unstable oscillator to change its frequency when the person reaches his hand over the circuit, for example. More importantly, in a digital system it causes crosstalk in multi-wire cables.

The way to block capacitive coupling is to enclose the circuit or conductor you want to protect in a metal shield. That's called an electrostatic or Faraday shield. If coverage is 100%, the shield does not have to be grounded, but it usually is, to ensure that circuit-to-shield capacitances go to signal reference ground rather than act as feedback and crosstalk elements. Besides, from a mechanical point of view, grounding it is almost inevitable.

A grounded Faraday shield can be used to break capacitive coupling between a noisy circuit and a victim circuit, as shown in Figure 4. Figure 4a shows two circuits capacitively coupled through the stray capacitance between them. In Figure 4b the stray capacitance is intercepted by a grounded Faraday shield, so that interference currents are shunted to ground. For example, a grounded plane can be inserted between PCBs (printed circuit boards) to eliminate most of the capacitive coupling between them.

Another application of the Faraday shield is in the electrostatically shielded transformer. Here, a conducting foil is laid between the primary and secondary coils so as to intercept the capacitive coupling between them. If a system is being upset by AC line transients, this type of transformer may provide the fix. To be effective in this application, the shield must be connected to the greenwire ground.

SHIELDING AGAINST INDUCTIVE COUPLING

With inductive coupling, the physical mechanism involved is a magnetic flux density B from some external interference source that links with a current loop in the victim circuit, and generates a voltage in the loop in accordance with Lenz's law: $v = -NA(dB/dt)$, where in this case N = 1 and A is the area of the current loop in the victim circuit.

There are two aspects to defending a circuit against inductive pickup. One aspect is to try to minimize the offensive fields at their source. This is done by minimizing the area of the current loop at the source so as to promote field cancellation, as described in the section on current loops. The other aspect is to minimize the inductive pickup in the victim circuit by minimizing the area of that current loop, since, from Lenz's law, the induced voltage is proportional to this area. So the two aspects really involve the same corrective action: minimize the areas of the current loops. In other words, minimizing the offensiveness of a circuit inherently minimizes its susceptibility.
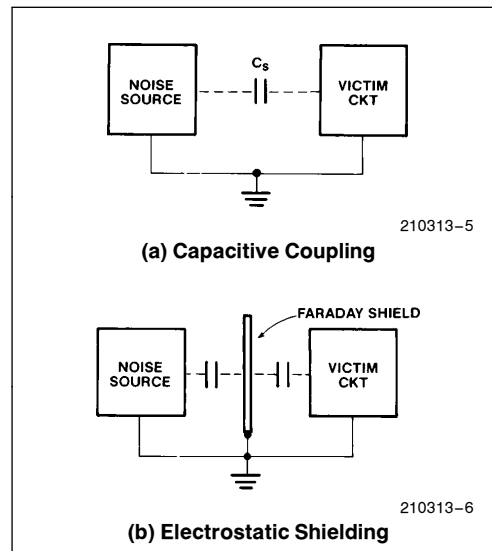

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(a) Capacitive Coupling

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(b) Electrostatic Shielding
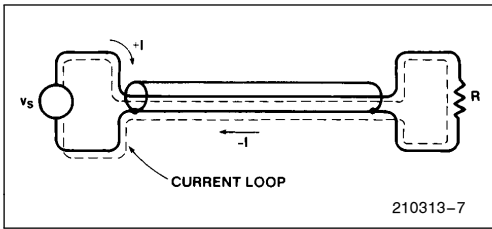
Figure 4. Use of Faraday Shield

Figure 5. External to the Shield, $\phi = 0$

Shielding against inductive coupling means nothing more nor less than controlling the dimensions of the current loops in the circuit. We must look at four examples of this type of "shielding": the coaxial cable, the twisted pair, the ground plane, and the gridded-ground PCB layout.

The Coaxial Cable—Figure 5 shows a coaxial cable carrying a current I from a signal source to a receiving load. The shield carries the same current as the center conductor. Outside the shield, the magnetic field produced by +I flowing in the center conductor is cancelled by the field produced by −I flowing in the shield. To the extent that the cable is ideal in producing zero external magnetic field, it is immune to inductive pickup from external sources. The cable adds effectively zero area to the loop. This is true only if the shield carries the same current as the center conductor.

In the real world, both the signal source and the receiving load are likely to have one end connected to a common signal ground. In that case, should the cable be grounded at one end, both ends, or neither end? The answer is that it should be grounded at both ends. Figure 6a shows the situation when the cable shield is grounded at only one end. In that case the current loop runs down the center conductor of the cable, then back through the common ground connection. The loop area is not well defined. The shield not only does not carry the same current as the center conductor, but it doesn't carry any current at all. There is no field cancellation at all. The shield has no effect whatsoever on either the generation of EMI or susceptibility to EMI. (It is, however, still effective as an electrostatic shield, or at least it would be if the shield coverage were 100%.)

Figure 6b shows the situation when the cable is grounded at both ends. Does the shield carry all of the return current, or only a portion of it on account of the shunting effect of the common ground connection? The answer to that question depends on the frequency content of the signal. In general, the current loop will follow the path of least impedance. At low frequencies, 0 Hz to several kHz, where the inductive reactance is insignificant, the current will follow the path of least resistance. Above a few kHz, where inductive reactance predominates, the current will follow the path of least inductance. The path of least inductance is the path of
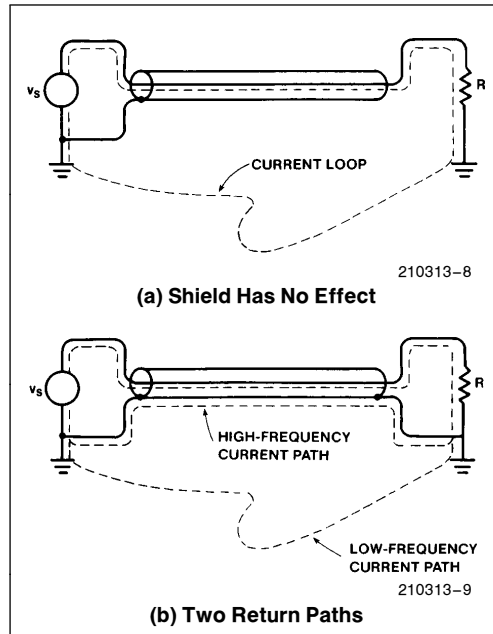

(a) Shield Has No Effect

(b) Two Return Paths

Figure 6. Use of Coaxial Cable

minimum loop area. Hence, for higher frequencies the shield carries virtually the same current as the center conductor, and is therefore effective against both generation and reception of EMI.

Note that we have now introduced the famous "ground loop" problem, as shown in Figure 7a. Fortunately, a digital system has some built-in immunity to moderate ground loop noise. In a noisy environment, however, one can break the ground loop, and still maintain the shielding effectiveness of the coaxial cable, by inserting an optical coupler, as shown in Figure 7b. What the optical coupler does, basically, is allow us to re-define the signal source as being ungrounded, so that that end of the cable need not be grounded, and still lets the shield carry the same current as the center conductor. Obviously, if the signal source weren't grounded in the first place, the optical coupler wouldn't be needed.

The Twisted Pair—A cheaper way to minimize loop area is to run the feed and return wires right next to each other. This isn't as effective as a coaxial cable in minimizing loop area. An ideal coaxial cable adds zero area to the loop, whereas merely keeping the feed and return wires next to each other is bound to add a finite area.

However, two things work to make this cheaper method almost as good as a coaxial cable. First, real coaxial cables are not ideal. If the shield current isn't evenly distributed around the center conductor at every cross-
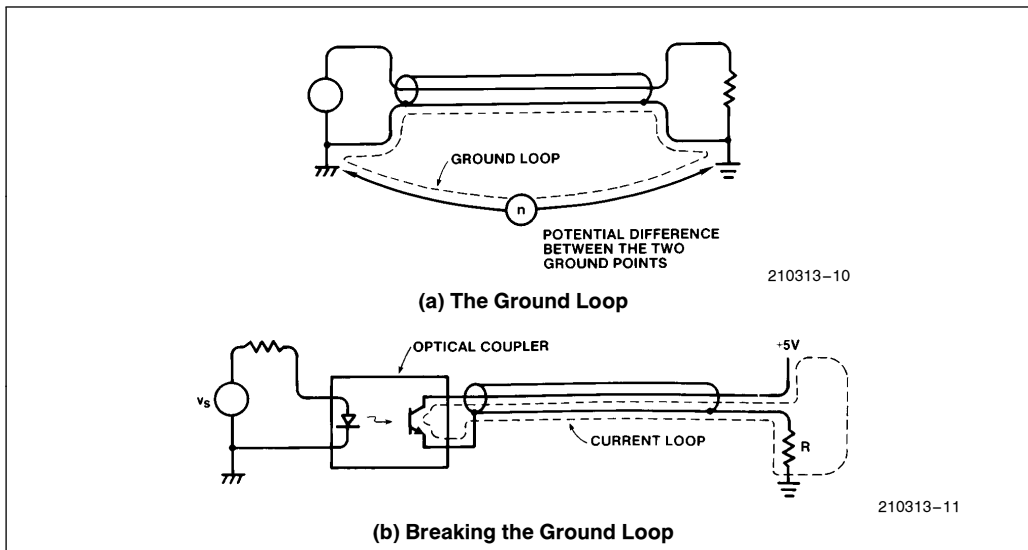
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(a) The Ground Loop

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(b) Breaking the Ground Loop

Figure 7. Use of Optical Coupler

section of the cable (it isn't), then field cancellation external to the shield is incomplete. If field cancellation is incomplete, then the effective area added to the loop by the cable isn't zero. Second, in the cheaper method the feed and return wires can be twisted together. This not only maintains their proximity, but the noise picked up in one twist tends to cancel out the noise picked up in the next twist down the line. Thus the "twisted pair" turns out to be about as good a shield against inductive coupling as coaxial cable is.

The twisted pair does not, however, provide electrostatic shielding (i.e., shielding against capacitive coupling). Another operational difference between them is that the coaxial cable works better at higher frequencies. This is primarily because the twisted pair adds more capacitive loading to the signal source than the coaxial cable does. The twisted pair is normally considered useful up to only about 1 MHz, as opposed to near a GHz for the coaxial cable.

The Ground Plane—The best way to minimize loop areas when many current loops are involved is to use a ground plane. A ground plane is a conducting surface that is to serve as a return conductor for all the current loops in the circuit. Normally, it would be one or more layers of a multilayer PCB. All ground points in the circuit go not to a grounded trace on the PCB, but directly to the ground plane. This leaves each current loop in the circuit free to complete itself in whatever configuration yields minimum loop area (for frequencies wherein the ground path impedance is primarily inductive).

Thus, if the feed path for a given signal zigzags its way across the PCB, the return path for this signal is free to zigzag right along beneath it on the ground plane, in such a configuration as to minimize the energy stored in the magnetic field produced by this current loop. Minimal magnetic flux means minimal effective loop area and minimal susceptibility to inductive coupling.

The Gridded-Ground PCB Layout—The next best thing to a ground plane is to lay out the ground traces on a PCB in the form of a grid structure, as shown in Figure 8. Laying horizontal traces on one side of the board and vertical traces on the other side allows the passage of signal and power traces. Wherever vertical and horizontal ground traces cross, they must be connected by a feed-through.

Have we not created here a network of "ground loops"? Yes, in the literal sense of the word, but loops in the ground layout on a PCB are not to be feared. Such inoffensive little loops have never caused as much noise pickup as their avoidance has. Trying to avoid innocent little loops in the ground layout, PCB designers have forced current loops into geometries that could swallow a whale. That is exactly the wrong thing to do.

The gridded ground structure works almost as well as the ground plane, as far as minimizing loop area is concerned. For a given current loop, the primary return path may have to zig once in a while where its feed path zags, but you still get a mathematically optimal dis-
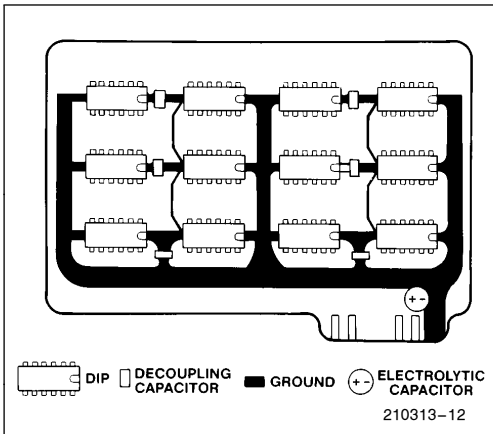
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Figure 8. PCB with Gridded Ground

tribution of currents in the grid structure, such that the current loop produces less magnetic flux than if the return path were restrained to follow any single given ground trace. The key to attaining minimum loop areas for all the current loops together is to let the ground currents distribute themselves around the entire area of the board as freely as possible. They want to minimize their own magnetic field. Just let them.

RF SHIELDING

A time-varying electric field generates a time-varying magnetic field, and vice versa. Far from the source of a time-varying EM field, the ratio of the amplitudes of the electric and magnetic fields is always 377Ω. Up close to the source of the fields, however, this ratio can be quite different, and dependent on the nature of the source. Where the ratio is near 377Ω is called the far field, and where the ratio is significantly different from 377Ω is called the near field. The ratio itself is called the wave impedance, E/H.

The near field goes out about 1/6 of a wavelength from the source. At 1 MHz this is about 150 feet, and at 10 MHz it's about 15 feet. That means if an EMI source is in the same room with the victim circuit, it's likely to be a near field problem. The reason this matters is that in the near field an RF interference problem could be almost entirely due to E-field coupling or H-field coupling, and that could influence the choice of an RF shield or whether an RF shield will help at all.

In the near field of a whip antenna, the E/H ratio is higher than 377Ω, which means it's mainly an E-field generator. A wire-wrap post can be a whip antenna. Interference from a whip antenna would be by electric field coupling, which is basically capacitive coupling. Methods to protect a circuit from capacitive coupling, such as a Faraday shield, would be effective

against RF interference from a whip antenna. A gridded-ground structure would be less effective.

In the near field of a loop antenna, the E/H ratio is lower than 377Ω, which means it's mainly an H-field generator. Any current loop is a loop antenna. Interference from a loop antenna would be by magnetic field coupling, which is the same as inductive coupling. Methods to protect a circuit from inductive coupling, such as a gridded-ground structure, would be effective against RF interference from a loop antenna. A Faraday shield would be less effective.

A more difficult case of RF interference, near field or far field, may require a genuine metallic RF shield. The idea behind RF shielding is that time-varying EMI fields induce currents in the shielding material. The induced currents dissipate energy in two ways: I^2R losses in the shielding material and radiation losses as they re-radiate their own EM fields. The energy for both of these mechanisms is drawn from the impinging EMI fields. Hence the EMI is weakened as it penetrates the shield.

More formally, the I^2R losses are referred to as absorption loss, and the re-radiation is called reflection loss. As it turns out, absorption loss is the primary shielding mechanism for H-fields, and reflection loss is the primary shielding mechanism for E-fields. Reflection loss, being a surface phenomenon, is pretty much independent of the thickness of the shielding material. Both loss mechanisms, however, are dependent on the frequency (ω) of the impinging EMI field, and on the permeability (μ) and conductivity (σ) of the shielding material. These loss mechanisms vary approximately as follows:

reflection loss to an E-field (in dB) $\sim \log \dfrac{\sigma}{\omega\mu}$

absorption loss to an H-field (in dB) $\sim t\sqrt{\omega\sigma\mu}$

where t is the thickness of the shielding material.

The first expression indicates that E-field shielding is more effective if the shield material is highly conductive, and less effective if the shield if ferromagnetic, and that low-frequency fields are easier to block than high-frequency fields. This is shown in Figure 9.
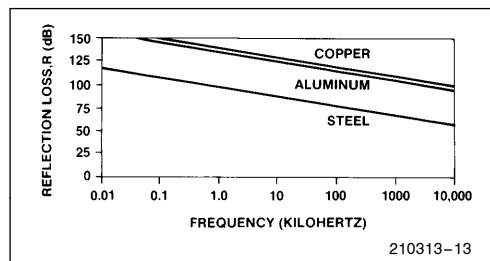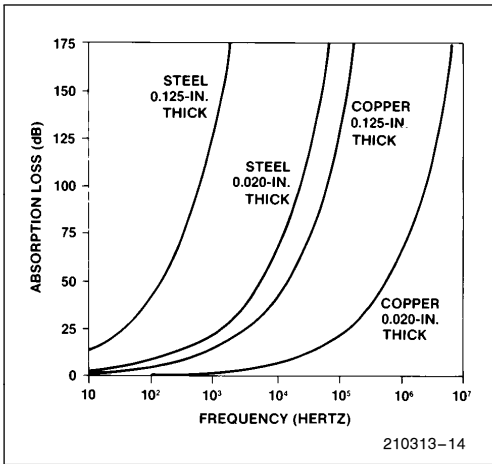

Figure 9. E-Field Shielding

Figure 10. H-Field Shielding

Figure 11. E- and H-Field Shielding

Copper and aluminum both have the same permeability, but copper is slightly more conductive, and so provides slightly greater reflection loss to an E-field. Steel is less effective for two reasons. First, it has a somewhat elevated permeability due to its iron content, and second, as tends to be the case with magnetic materials, it is less conductive.

On the other hand, according to the expression for absorption loss to an H-field, H-field shielding is more effective at higher frequencies and with shield material that has both high conductivity and high permeability. In practice, however, selecting steel for its high permeability involves some compromise in conductivity. But the increase in permeability more than makes up for the decrease in conductivity, as can be seen in Figure 10. This figure also shows the effect of shield thickness.

A composite of E-field and H-field shielding is shown in Figure 11. However, this type of data is meaningful only in the far field. In the near field the EMI could be 90% H-field, in which case the reflection loss is irrelevant. It would be advisable then to beef up the absorption loss, at the expense of reflection loss, by choosing steel. A better conductor than steel might be less expensive, but quite ineffective.

A different shielding mechanism that can be taken advantage of for low frequency magnetic fields is the ability of a high permeability material such as mumetal to divert the field by presenting a very low reluctance path to the magnetic flux. Above a few kHz, however, the permeability of such materials is the same as steel.

In actual fact the selection of a shielding material turns out to be less important than the presence of seams, joints and holes in the physical structure of the enclosure. The shielding mechanisms are related to the induction of currents in the shield material, but the cur-
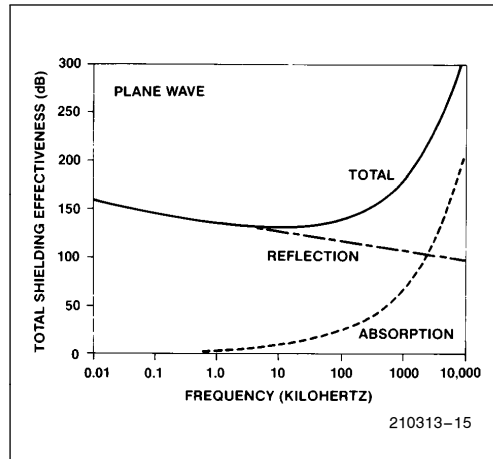
rents must be allowed to flow freely. If they have to detour around slots and holes, as shown in Figure 12, the shield loses much of its effectiveness.

As can be seen in Figure 12, the severity of the detour has less to do with the area of the hole than it does with the geometry of the hole. Comparing Figure 12c with 12d shows that a long narrow discontinuity such as a seam can cause more RF leakage than a line of holes with larger total area. A person who is responsible for designing or selecting rack or chassis enclosures for an EMI environment needs to be familiar with the techniques that are available for maintaining electrical continuity across seams. Information on these techniques is available in the references.

Grounds

There are two kinds of grounds: earth-ground and signal ground. The earth is not an equipotential surface, so earth ground potential varies. That and its other electrical properties are not conducive to its use as a return conductor in a circuit. However, circuits are often connected to earth ground for protection against shock hazards. The other kind of ground, signal ground, is an arbitrarily selected reference node in a circuit—the node with respect to which other node voltages in the circuit are measured.

SAFETY GROUND

The standard 3-wire single-phase AC power distribution system is represented in Figure 13. The white wire is earth-grounded at the service entrance. If a load circuit has a metal enclosure or chassis, and if the black wire develops a short to the enclosure, there will be a shock hazard to operating personnel, unless the enclosure itself is earth-grounded. If the enclosure is earth-
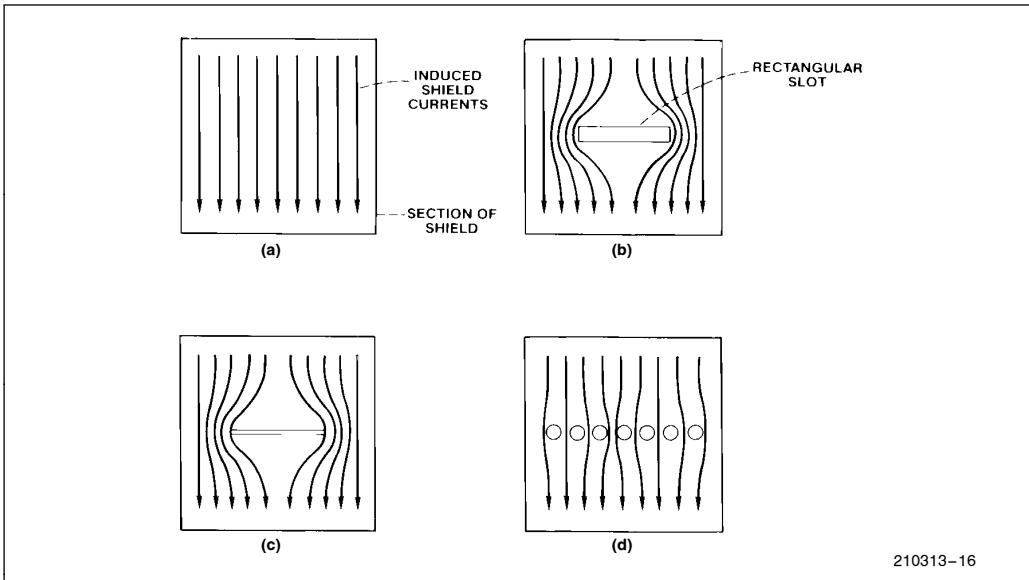
Figure 12. Effect of Shield Discontinuity on Magnetically Induced Shield Current

grounded, a short results in a blown fuse rather than a "hot" enclosure. The earth-ground connection to the enclosure is called a safety ground. The advantage of the 3-wire power system is that it distributes a safety ground along with the power.

Note that the safety-ground wire carries no current, except in case of a fault, so that at least for low frequencies it's at earth-ground potential along its entire length. The white wire, on the other hand, may be several volts off ground, due to the IR drop along its length.
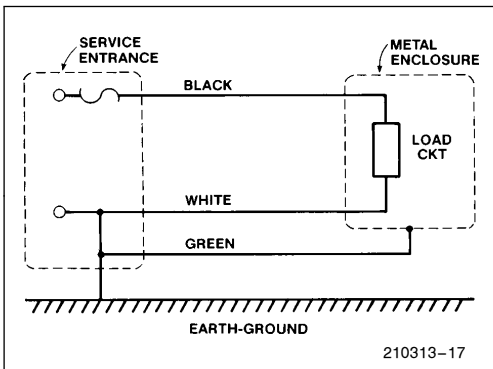

Figure 13. Single-Phase Power Distribution

SIGNAL GROUND

Signal ground is a single point in a circuit that is designated to be the reference node for the circuit. Commonly, wires that connect to this single point are also referred to as "signal ground." In some circles "power supply common" or PSC is the preferred terminology for these conductors. In any case, the manner in which these wires connect to the actual reference point is the basis of distinction among three kinds of signal-ground wiring methods: series, parallel, and multipoint. These methods are shown in Figure 14.

The series connection is pretty common because it's simple and economical. It's the noisiest of the three, however, due to common ground impedance coupling between the circuits. When several circuits share a ground wire, currents from one circuit, flowing through the finite impedance of the common ground line, cause variations in the ground potential of the other circuits. Given that the currents in a digital system tend to be spiked, and that the common impedance is mainly inductive reactance, the variations could be bad enough to cause bit errors in high current or particularly noisy situations.
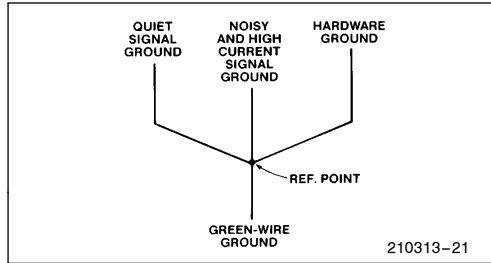
The parallel connection eliminates common ground impedance problems, but uses a lot of wire. Other disadvantages are that the impedance of the individual ground lines can be very high, and the ground lines themselves can become sources of EMI.

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In the multipoint system, ground impedance is minimized by using a ground plane with the various circuits connected to it by very short ground leads. This type of connection would be used mainly in RF circuits above 10 MHz.

PRACTICAL GROUNDING

A combination of series and parallel ground-wiring methods can be used to trade off economic and the various electrical considerations. The idea is to run series connections for circuits that have similar noise properties, and connect them at a single reference point, as in the parallel method, as shown in Figure 15.

In Figure 15, "noisy signal ground" connects to things like motors and relays. Hardware ground is the safety ground connection to chassis, racks, and cabinets. It's a mistake to use the hardware ground as a return path for signal currents because it's fairly noisy (for example, it's the hardware ground that receives an ESD spark) and tends to have high resistance due to joints and seams.

Series Connection

210313−18

Parallel Connection

210313−19

Multipoint Connection

210313−20

Figure 14. Three Ways to Wire the Grounds

**Figure 15. Parallel Connection
of Series Grounds**

Screws and bolts don't always make good electrical connections because of galvanic action, corrosion, and dirt. These kinds of connections may work well at first, and then cause mysterious maladies as the system ages.

Figure 16 illustrates a grounding system for a 9-track digital tape recorder, showing an application of the series/parallel ground-wiring method.

Figure 17 shows a similar separation of grounds at the PCB level. Currents in multiplexed LED displays tend to put a lot of noise on the ground and supply lines because of the constant switching and changing involved in the scanning process. The segment driver ground is relatively quiet, since it doesn't conduct the LED currents. The digit driver ground is noisier, and should be provided with a separate path to the PCB ground terminal, even if the PCB ground layout is gridded. The LED feed and return current paths should be laid out on opposite sides of the board like parallel flat conductors.

Figure 18 shows right and wrong ways to make ground connections in racks. Note that the safety ground connections from panel to rack are made through ground straps, not panel screws. Rack 1 correctly connects signal ground to rack ground only at the single reference point. Rack 2 incorrectly connects signal ground to rack ground at two points, creating a ground loop around points 1, 2, 3, 4, 1.

Breaking the "electronics ground" connection to point 1 eliminates the ground loop, but leaves signal ground in rack 2 sharing a ground impedance with the relatively noisy hardware ground to the reference point; in fact, it may end up using hardware ground as a return path for signal and power supply currents. This will probably cause more problems than the ground loop.

BRAIDED CABLE

Ground impedance problems can be virtually eliminated by using braided cable. The reduction in impedance is due to skin effect: At higher frequencies the current tends to flow along the surface of a conductor rather
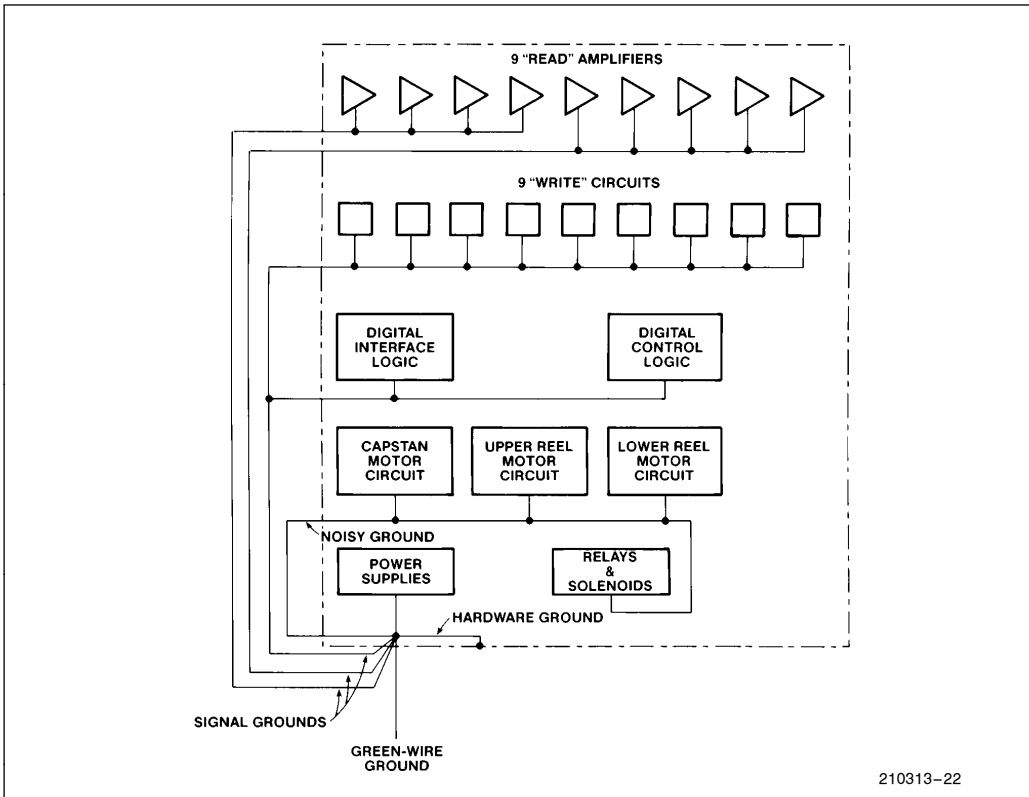
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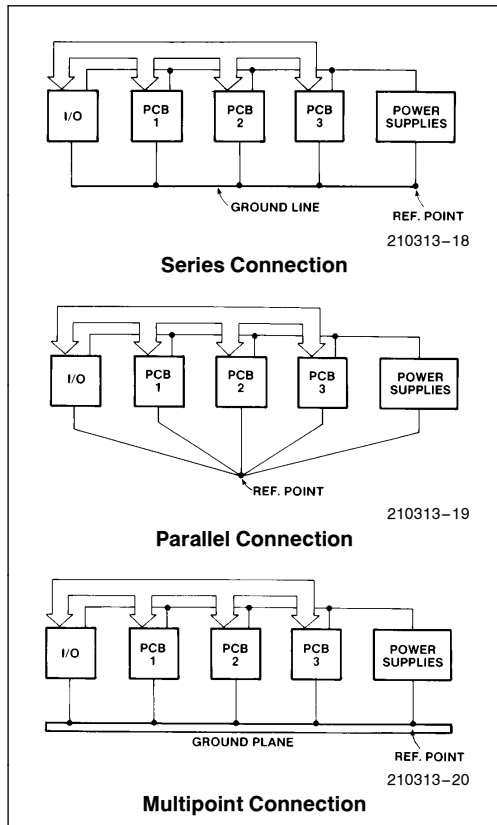
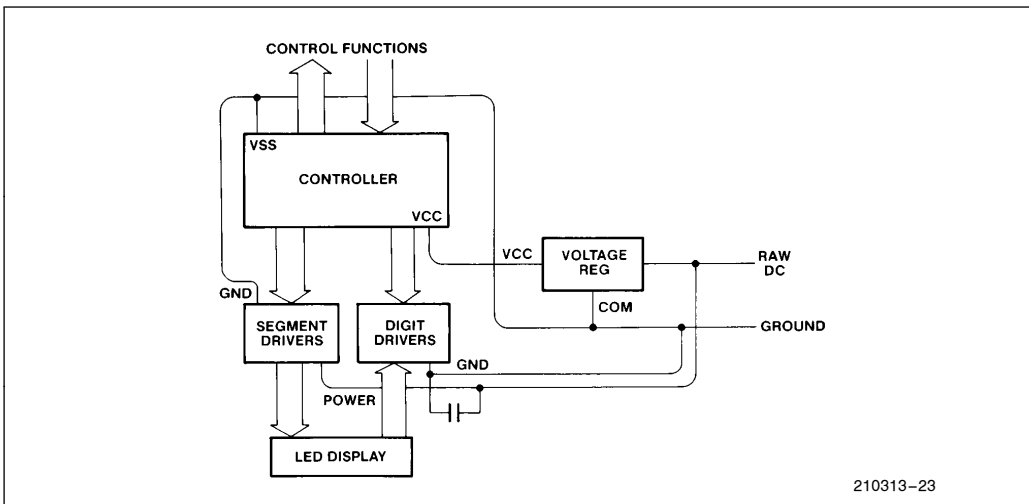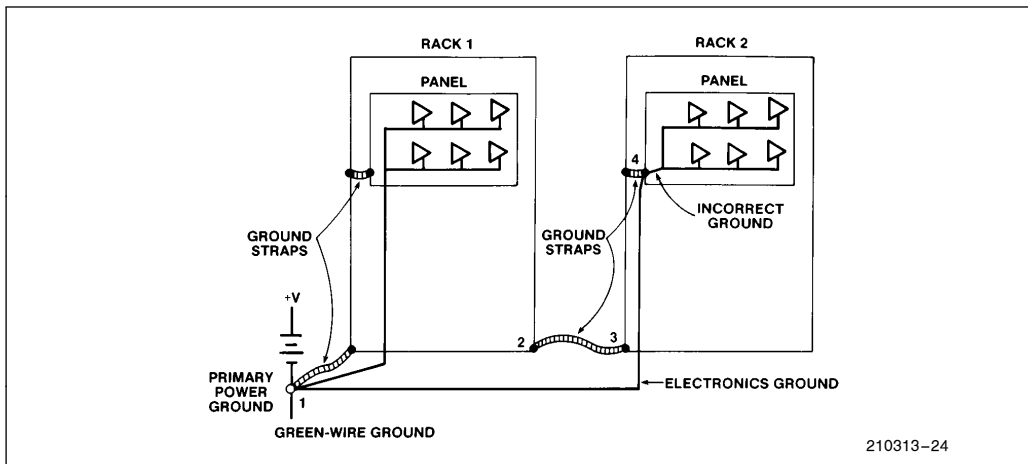**Figure 16. Ground System in a 9-Track Digital Recorder**

Figure 17. Separate Ground for Multiplexed LED Display

intel

AP-125

Figure 18. Electronic Circuits Mounted in Equipment Racks Should Have Separate Ground Connections. Rack 1 Shows Correct Grounding, Rack 2 Shows Incorrect Grounding.

than uniformly through its bulk. While this effect tends to increase the impedance of a given conductor, it also indicates the way to minimize impedance, and that is to manipulate the shape of the cross-section so as to provide more surface area. For its bulk, braided cable is almost pure surface.

Power Supply Distribution and Decoupling

The main consideration for power supply distribution lines is, as for signal lines, to minimize the areas of the current loops. But the power supply lines take on an importance that no signal line has when one considers the fact that these lines have access to every PC board in the system. The very extensiveness of the supply current loops makes it difficult to keep loop areas small. And, a noise glitch on a supply line is a glitch delivered to every board in the system.

The power supply provides low-frequency current to the load, but the inductance of the board-to-board and chip-to-chip distribution network makes it difficult for the power supply to maintain VCC specs on the chip while providing the current spikes that a digital system requires. In addition, the power supply current loop is a very large one, which means there will be a lot of noise pick-up. Figure 19a shows a load circuit trying to draw current spikes from a supply voltage through the line impedance. To the VCC waveform shown in that figure should be added the inductive pick-up associated with a large loop area.

Adding a decoupling capacitor solves two problems: The capacitor acts as a nearby source of charge to supply the current spikes through a smaller line impedance, and it defines a much smaller loop area for the

higher frequency components of EMI. This is illustrated in Figure 19b, which shows the capacitor supplying the current spike, during which VCC drops from 5V by the amount indicated in the figure. Between current spikes the capacitor recovers through the line impedance.

One should resist the temptation to add a resistor or an inductor to the decoupler so as to form a genuine RC or LC low-pass filter because that slows down the speed with which the decoupler cap can be refreshed. Good filtering and good decoupling are not necessarily the same thing.

The current loop for the higher frequency currents, then, is defined by the decoupling cap and the load circuit, rather than by the power supply and the load circuit. For the decoupling cap to be able to provide the current spikes required by the load, the inductance of this current loop must be kept small, which is the same as saying the loop area must be kept small. This is also the requirement for minimizing inductive pick-up in the loop.

There are two kinds of decoupling caps: board decouplers and chip decouplers. A board decoupler will normally be a 10 to 100 μF electrolytic capacitor placed near to where the power supply enters the PC board, but its placement is relatively non-critical. The purpose of the board decoupler is to refresh the charge on the chip decouplers. The chip decouplers are what actually provide the current spikes to the chips. A chip decoupler will normally be a 0.1 to 1 μF ceramic capacitor placed near the chip and connected to the chip by traces that minimize the area of the loop formed by the cap and the chip. If a chip decoupler is not properly placed on the board, it will be ineffective as a decoupler
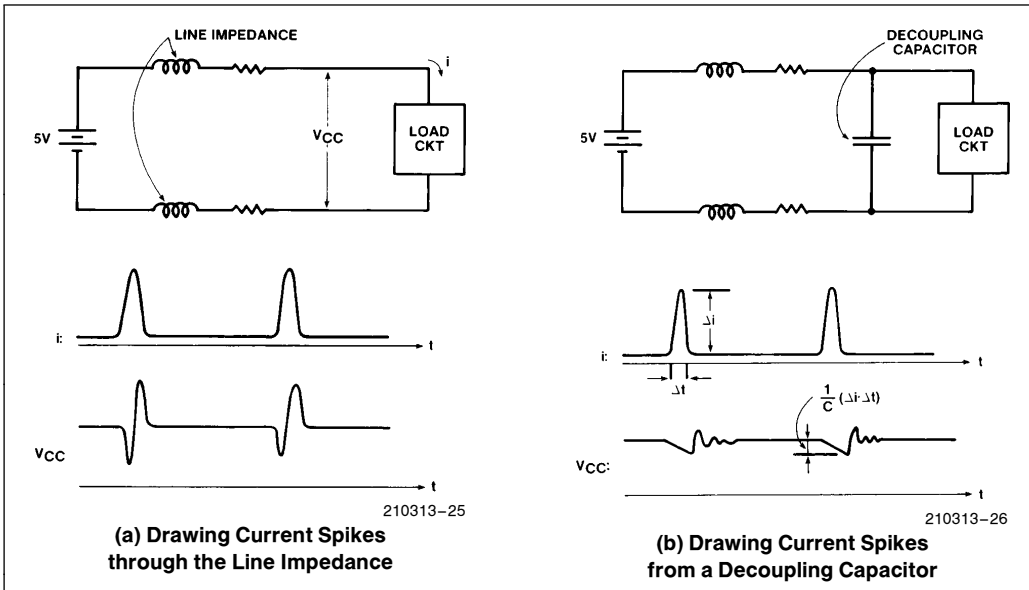
13

(a) Drawing Current Spikes
through the Line Impedance

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(b) Drawing Current Spikes
from a Decoupling Capacitor

210313-26

Figure 19. What a Decoupling Capacitor Does

and will serve only to increase the cost of the board. Good and bad placement of decoupling capacitors are illustrated in Figure 20.

Power distribution traces on the PC board need to be laid out so as to obtain minimal area (minimal inductance) in the loops formed by each chip and its decoupler, and by the chip decouplers and the board decoupler. One way to accomplish this goal is to use a power plane. A power plane is the same as a ground plane, but at VCC potential. More economically, a power grid similar to the ground grid previously discussed (Figure 8) can be used. Actually, if the chip decoupling loops are small, other aspects of the power layout are less critical. In other words, power planes and power gridding aren't needed, but power traces *should* be laid in the closest possible proximity to ground traces, prefer-

ably so that each power trace is on the direct opposite side of the board from a ground trace.

Special-purpose power supply distribution buses which mount on the PCB are available. The buses use a parallel flat conductor configuration, one conductor being a VCC line and the other a ground line. Used in conjunction with a gridded ground layout, they not only provide a low-inductance distribution system, but can themselves form part of the ground grid, thus facilitating the PCB layout. The buses are available with and without enhanced bus capacitance, under the names Mini/Bus and Q/PAC from Rogers Corp. (5750 E. McKellips, Mesa, AZ 85205).

SELECTING THE VALUE OF THE DECOUPLING CAP

The effectiveness of the decoupling cap has a lot to do with the way the power and ground traces connect this capacitor to the chip. In fact, the area formed by this loop is more important than the value of the capacitance. Then, given that the area of this loop is indeed minimal, it can generally be said that the larger the value of the decoupling cap, the more effective it is, if the cap has a mica, ceramic, glass, or polystyrene dielectric.

It's often said, and not altogether accurately, that the chip decoupler shouldn't have too large a value. There are two reasons for this statement. One is that some capacitors, because of the nature of their dielectrics, tend to become inductive or lossy at higher frequencies. This is true of electrolytic capacitors, but mica, glass,
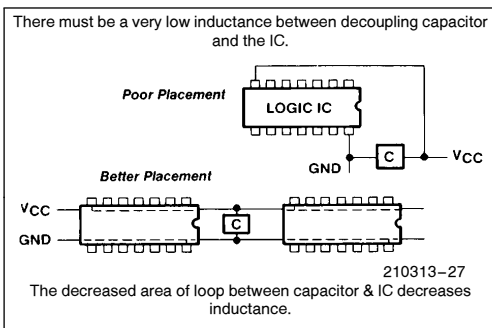

There must be a very low inductance between decoupling capacitor and the IC.

210313-27

The decreased area of loop between capacitor & IC decreases inductance.

Figure 20. Placement of Decoupling Capacitors

ceramic, and polystyrene dielectrics work well to several hundred MHz. The other reason cited for not using too large a capacitance has to do with lead inductance.

The capacitor with its lead inductance forms a series LC circuit. Below the frequency of series resonance, the net impedance of the combination is capacitive. Above that frequency, the net impedance is inductive. Thus a decoupling capacitor is capacitive only below the frequency of series resonance. The frequency is given by

$$f_0 = \frac{1}{2\pi\sqrt{LC}}$$

where C is the decoupling capacitance and L is the lead inductance between the capacitor and the chip. On a PC board this inductance is determined by the layout, and is the same whether the capacitor dropped into the PCB holes is 0.001 μF or 1 μF. Thus, increasing the capacitance lowers the series resonant frequency. In fact, according to the resonant frequency formula, increasing C by a factor of 100 lowers the resonant frequency by a factor of 10.

Figures quoted on the series resonant frequency of a 0.01 μF capacitor run from 10 to 15 MHz, depending on the lead length. If these numbers were accurate, a 1 μF capacitor in the same position on the board would have a resonant frequency of 1.0 to 1.5 MHz, and as a decoupler would do more harm than good. However, the numbers are based on a presumed inductance of a given length of wire (the lead length). It should be noted that a "length of wire" has no inductance at all, strictly speaking. Only a complete current loop has inductance, and the inductance depends on the geometry of the loop. Figures quoted on the inductance of a length of wire are based on a presumably "very large" loop area, such that the magnetic field produced by the return current has no cancellation effect on the field produced by the current in the given length of wire. Such a loop geometry is not and should not be the case with the decoupling loop.

Figure 21 shows VCC waveforms, measured between pins 40 and 20 (VCC and VSS) of an 8751 CPU, for several conditions of decoupling on a PC board that has a decoupling loop area slightly larger than necessary. These photographs show the effects of increasing the decoupling capacitance and decreasing the area of the decoupling loop. The indications are that a 1 μF capacitor is better than a 0.1 μF capacitor, which in turn is better than nothing, and that the board should have been laid out with more attention paid to the area of the decoupling loop.

Figure 21e was obtained using a special-purpose experimental capacitor designed by Rogers Corp. (Q-Pac Division, Mesa, AZ) for use as a decoupler. It consists of two parallel plates, the length of a 40-pin DIP, separated by a ceramic dielectric. Sandwiched between the CPU chip and the PCB (or between the CPU socket and the PCB), it makes connection to pins 40 and 20, forming a leadless decoupling capacitor. It is obviously a configuration of minimal inductance. Unfortunately, the particular sample tested had only 0.07 μF of capacitance and so was unable to prevent the 1 MHz ripple as effectively as the configuration of Figure 21d. It seems apparent, though, that with more capacitance this part will alleviate a lot of decoupling problems.

THE CASE FOR ON-BOARD VOLTAGE REGULATION

To complicate matters, supply line glitches aren't always picked up in the distribution networks, but can come from the power supply circuit itself. In that case, a well-designed distribution network faithfully delivers the glitch throughout the system. The VCC glitch in Figure 22 was found to be coming from within a bench power supply in response to the EMP produced by an induction coil spark generator that was being used at Intel during a study of noise sensitivity. The VCC glitch is about 400 mV high and some 20 μs in duration. Normal board decoupling techniques were ineffective in removing it, but adding an on-board voltage regulator chip did the job.

Thus, a good case can be made in favor of using a voltage regulator chip on each PCB, instead of doing all the voltage regulation at the supply circuit. This eases requirements on the heat-sinking at the supply circuit, and alleviates much of the distribution and board decoupling headaches. However, it also brings in the possibility that different boards would be operating at slightly different VCC levels due to tolerance in the regulator chips; this then leads to slightly different logic levels from board to board. The implications of that may vary from nothing to latch-up, depending on what kinds of chips are on the boards, and how they react to an input "high" that is perhaps 0.4V higher than local VCC.

Recovering Gracefully from a Software Upset

Even when one follows all the best guidelines for designing for a noisy environment, it's always possible for a noise transient to occur which exceeds the circuit's immunity level. In that case, one can strive at least for a graceful recovery.

Graceful recovery schemes involve additional hardware and/or software which is supposed to return the system to a normal operating mode after a software upset has occurred. Two decisions have to be made: How to recognize when an upset has occurred, and what to do about it.
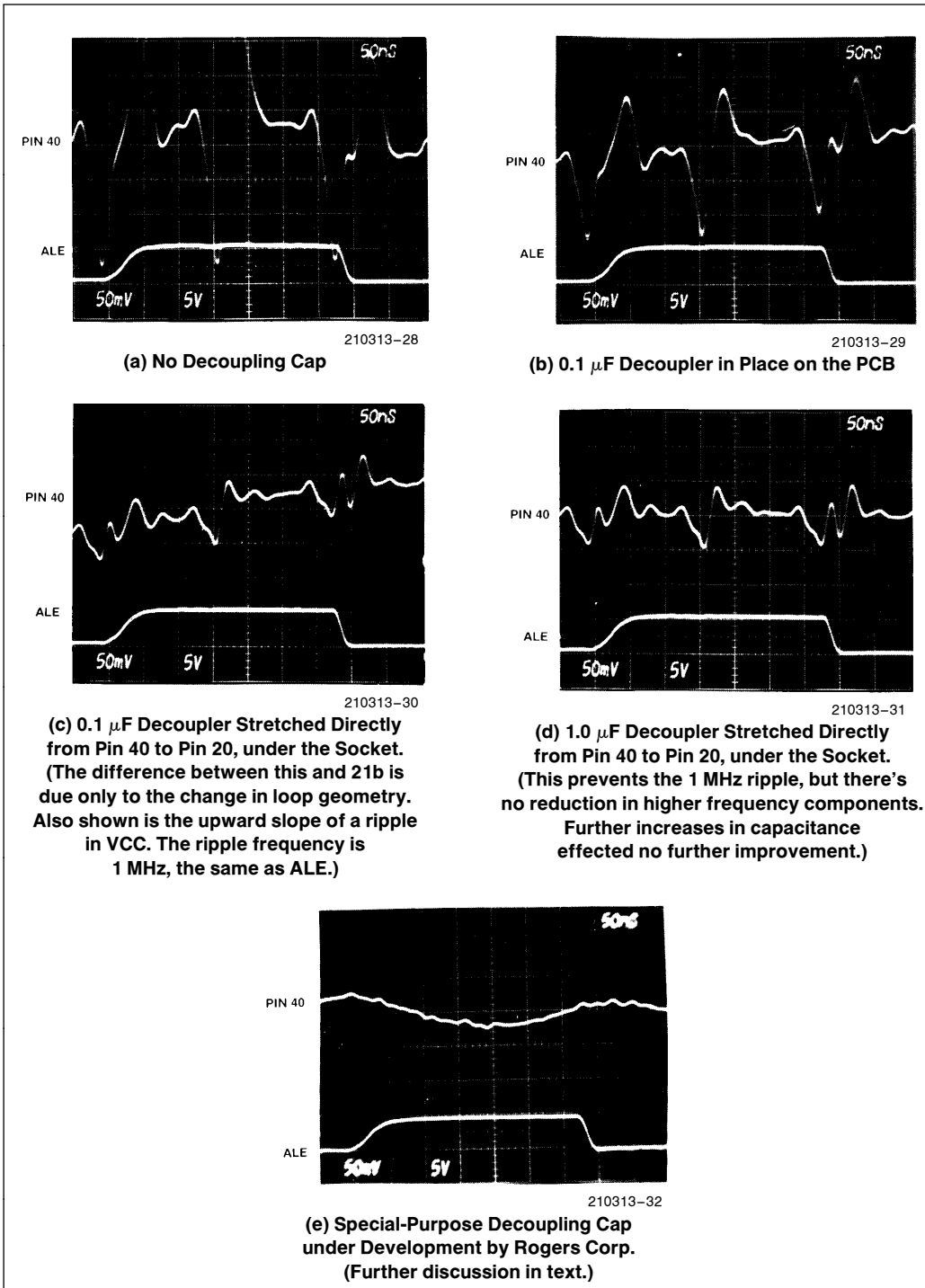
15

(a) No Decoupling Cap

(b) 0.1 μF Decoupler in Place on the PCB

(c) 0.1 μF Decoupler Stretched Directly
from Pin 40 to Pin 20, under the Socket.
(The difference between this and 21b is
due only to the change in loop geometry.
Also shown is the upward slope of a ripple
in VCC. The ripple frequency is
1 MHz, the same as ALE.)

(d) 1.0 μF Decoupler Stretched Directly
from Pin 40 to Pin 20, under the Socket.
(This prevents the 1 MHz ripple, but there's
no reduction in higher frequency components.
Further increases in capacitance
effected no further improvement.)

(e) Special-Purpose Decoupling Cap
under Development by Rogers Corp.
(Further discussion in text.)
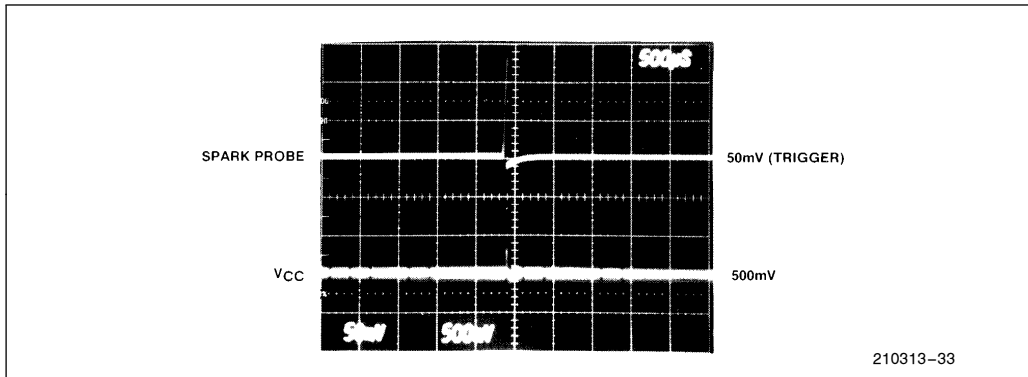
Figure 21. Noise on VCC Line

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Figure 22. EMP-Induced Glitch

If the designer knows what kinds and combinations of outputs can legally be generated by the system, he can use gates to recognize and flag the occurrence of an illegal state of affairs. The flag can then trigger a jump to a recovery routine which then may check or re-initialize data, perhaps output an error message, or generate a simple reset.

The most reliable scheme is to use a so-called watchdog circuit. Here the CPU is programmed to generate a periodic signal as long as the system is executing instructions in an expected manner. The periodic signal is then used to hold off a circuit that will trigger a jump to a recovery routine. The periodic signal needs to be AC-coupled to the trigger circuit so that a "stuck-at" fault won't continue to hold off the trigger. Then, if the processor locks up someplace, the periodic signal is lost and the watchdog triggers a reset.

In practice, it may be convenient to drive the watchdog circuit with a signal which is being generated anyway by the system. One needs to be careful, however, that an upset does in fact discontinue that signal. Specifically, for example, one could use one of the digit drive signals going to a multiplexed display. But display scanning is often handled in response to a timer-interrupt, which may continue operating even though the main program is in a failure mode. Even so, with a little extra software, the signal can be used to control the watchdog (see Reference 8 on this).

Simpler schemes can work well for simpler systems. For example, if a CPU isn't doing anything but scanning and decoding a keyboard, there's little to lose and much to gain by simply resetting it periodically with an astable multivibrator. It only takes about 13 μs (at 6 MHz) to reset an 8048 if the clock oscillator is already running.

A zero-cost measure is simply to fill all unused program memory with NOPs and JMPs to a recovery routine. The effectiveness of this method is increased by writing the program in segments that are separated by

NOPs and JMPs. It's still possible, of course, to get hung up in a data table or something. But you get a lot of protection, for the cost.

Further discussion of graceful recovery schemes can be found in Reference 13.

Special Problem Areas

ESD

MOS chips have some built-in protection against a static charge build-up on the pins, as would occur during normal handling, but there's no protection against the kinds of current levels and rise times that occur in a genuine electrostatic spark. These kinds of discharges can blow a crater in the silicon.

It must be recognized that connecting CPU pins unprotected to a keyboard or to anything else that is subject to electrostatic discharges makes an extremely fragile configuration. Buffering them is the very least one can do. But buffering doesn't completely solve the problem, because then the buffer chips will sustain the damage (even TTL); therefore, one might consider mounting the buffer chips in sockets for ease of replacement.

Transient suppressors, such as the TranZorbs made by General Semiconductor Industries (Tempe, AZ), may in the long run provide the cheapest protection if their "zero inductance" structure is used. The structure and circuit application are shown in Figure 23.

The suppressor element is a pn junction that operates like a Zener diode. Back-to-back units are available for AC operation. The element is more or less an open circuit at normal system voltage (the standoff voltage rating for the device), and conducts like a Zener diode at the clamping voltage.

The lead inductance in the conventional transient suppressor package makes the conventional package essen-
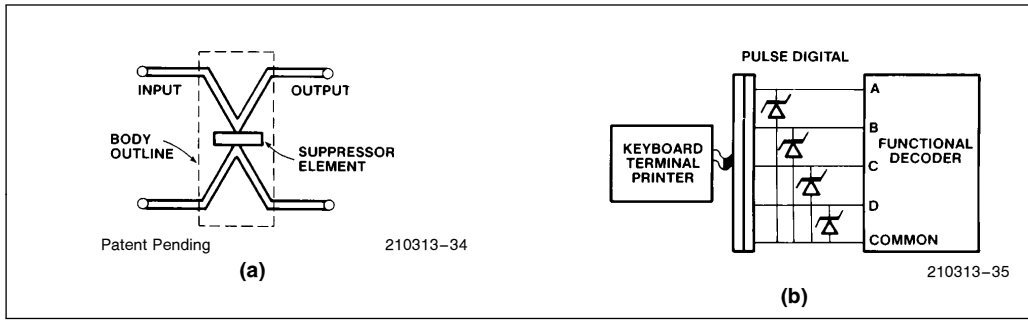
17

Figure 23. "Zero-Inductance" Structure and Use in Circuit

tially useless for protection against ESD pulses, owing to the fast rise of these pulses. The "zero inductance" units are available singly in a 4-pin DIP, and in arrays of four to a 16-pin DIP for PCB level protection. In that application they should be mounted in close proximity to the chips they protect.

In addition, metal enclosures or frames or parts that can receive an ESD spark should be connected by braided cable to the green-wire ground. Because of the ground impedance, ESD current shouldn't be allowed to flow through any signal ground, even if the chips are protected by transient suppressors. A 35 kV ESD spark can always spare a few hundred volts to drive a fast current pulse down a signal ground line if it can't find a braided cable to follow. Think how delighted your 8048 will be to find its VSS pin 250V higher than VCC for a few 10s of nanoseconds.

THE AUTOMOTIVE ENVIRONMENT

The automobile presents an extremely hostile environment for electronic systems. There are several parts to it:

1. Temperature extremes from $-40°C$ to $+125°C$ (under the hood) or $+85°C$ (in the passenger compartment)

2. Electromagnetic pulses from the ignition system

3. Supply line transients that will knock your socks off

One needs to take a long, careful look at the temperature extremes. The allowable storage temperature range for most Intel MOS chips is $-65°C$ to $+150°C$, although some chips have a maximum storage temperature rating of $+125°C$. In operation (or "under bias," as the data sheets say) the allowable ambient temperature range depends on the product grade, as follows:

Grade	Ambient Temperature	
	Min	**Max**
Commercial	0	70
Industrial	-40	$+85$
Automotive	-40	$+110$
Military	-55	$+125$

The different product grades are actually the same chip, but tested according to different standards. Thus, a given commercial-grade chip might actually pass military temperature requirements, but not have been tested for it. (Of course, there are other differences in grading requirements having to do with packaging, burn-in, traceability, etc.)

In any case, it's apparent that commercial-grade chips can't be used safely in automotive applications, not even in the passenger compartment. Industrial-grade chips can be used in the passenger compartment, and automotive or military chips are required in under-the-hood applications.

Ignition noise, CB radios, and that sort of thing are probably the least of your worries. In a poorly designed system, or in one that has not been adequately tested for the automotive environment, this type of EMI might cause a few software upsets, but not destroy chips.

The major problem, and the one that seems to come as the biggest surprise to most people, is the line transients. Regrettably, the 12V battery is not actually the source of power when the car is running. The charging system is, and it's not very clean. The only time the battery is the real source of power is when the car is first being started, and in that condition the battery terminals may be delivering about 5V or 6V. As follows is a brief description of the major idiosyncracies of the "12V" automotive power line.
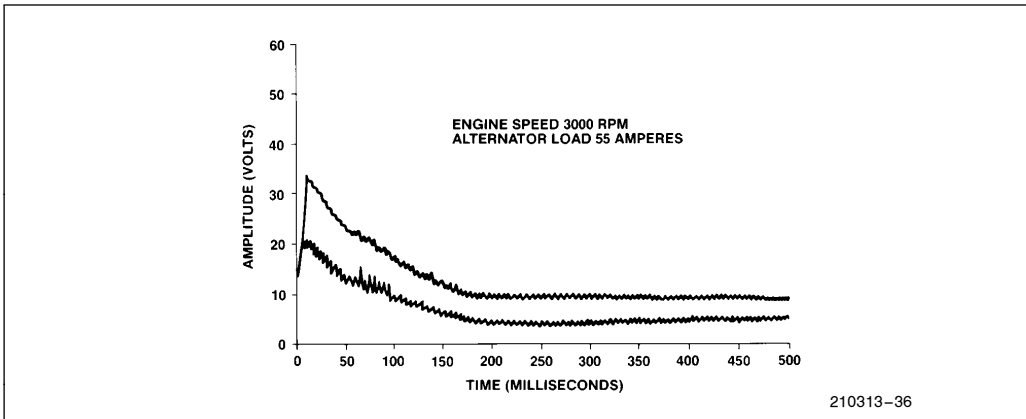
Figure 24. Typical Load Dump Transients

• An abrupt reduction in the alternator load causes a positive voltage transient called "load dump." In a load dump transient the line voltage rises to 20V or 30V in a few μs, then decays exponentially with a time constant of about 100 μs, as shown in Figure 24. Much higher peak voltages and longer decay times have also been reported. The worst case load dump is caused by disconnecting a low battery from the alternator circuit while the alternator is running. Normally this would happen intermittently when the battery terminal connections are defective.

• When the ignition is turned off, as the field excitation decays, the line voltage can go to between −40V and −100V for 100 μs or more.

• Miscellaneous solenoid switching transients, such as the one shown in Figure 25, can drive the line to + or −200V to 400V for several μs.

• Mutual coupling between unshielded wires in long harnesses can induce 100V and 200V transients in unprotected circuits.

What all this adds up to is that people in the business of building systems for automotive applications need a comprehensive testing program. An SAE guideline which describes the automotive environment is available to designers: SAE J1211, "Recommended Environmental Practices for Electronic Equipment Design," *1980 SAE Handbook,* Part 1, pp. 22.80–22.96.

Some suggestions for protecting circuitry are shown in Figure 26. A transient suppressor is placed in front of the regulator chip to protect it. Since the rise times in these transients are not like those in ESD pulses, lead inductance is less critical and conventional devices can be used. The regulator itself is pretty much of a necessity, since a load dump transient is simply not going to be removed by any conventional LC or RC filter.
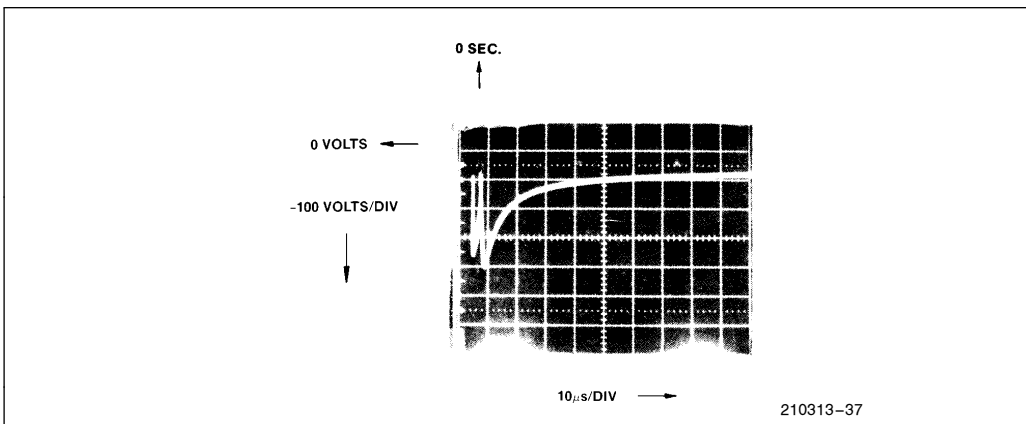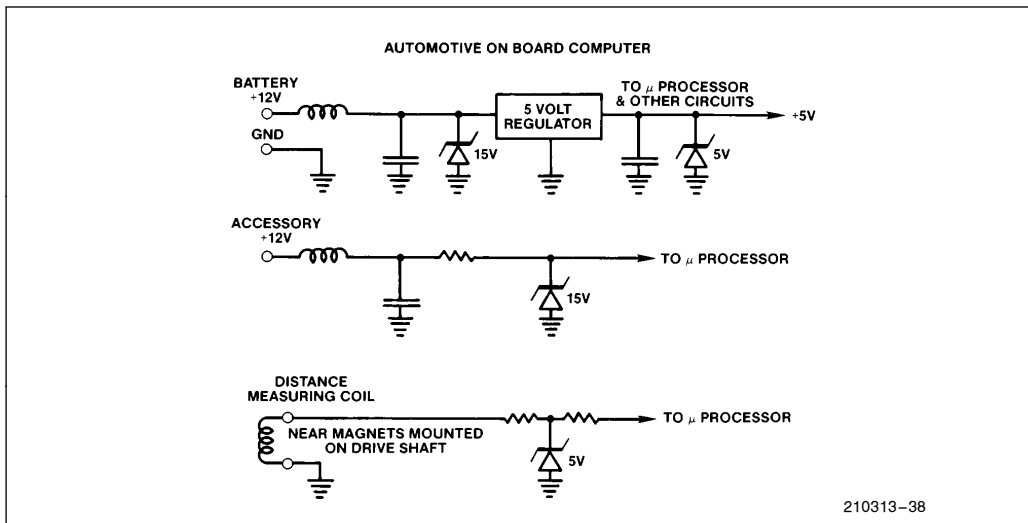

Figure 25. Transient Created by De-energizing an Air Conditioning Clutch Solenoid

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AUTOMOTIVE ON BOARD COMPUTER

Figure 26. Use of Transient Suppressors in Automotive Applications

Special I/O interfacing is also required, because of the need for high tolerance to voltage transients, input noise, input/output isolation, etc. In addition, switches that are being monitored or driven by these buffers are usually referenced to chassis ground instead of signal ground, and in a car there can be many volts difference between the two. I/O interfacing is discussed in Reference 2.

The EMC Education committee has available a video tape: "Introduction to EMC—A Video Training Tape," by Henry Ott. Don White Consultants offers a series of training courses on many different aspects of electromagnetic compatibility. Most organizations that sponsor EMC courses also offer in-plant presentations.

Parting Thoughts

The main sources of information for this Application Note were the references by Ott and by White. Reference 5 is probably the finest treatment currently available on the subject. The other references provided specific information as cited in the text.

Courses and seminars on the subject of electromagnetic interference are given regularly throughout the year. Information on these can be obtained from:

IEEE Electromagnetic Compatibility Society
EMC Education Committee
345 East 47th Street
New York, NY 10017

Don White Consultants, Inc.
International Training Centre
P.O. Box D
Gainesville, VA 22065
Phone: (703) 347-0030

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