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Electronic fuse systems and devices

Abstract

Embodiments are directed to electronic fuse devices and systems. One such electronic fuse includes current sensing circuitry that senses a current in a conductor coupled between a power supply and a load, and generates a current sensing signal indicative of the sensed current. I2t circuitry receives the current sensing signal and determines whether the sensed current exceeds an I2t curve of the conductor. The electronic fuse further includes at least one of external MOSFET temperature sensing circuitry that senses a temperature of an external MOSFET coupled to the conductor, low current bypass circuitry that supplies a reduced current to the load in a low power consumption mode during which the external MOSFET is in a non-conductive state, or desaturation sensing circuitry that senses a drain-source voltage of the external MOSFET.

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Background/Summary

BACKGROUND

Technical Field

(1) The present disclosure generally relates to electronic fuse systems and devices.

Description of the Related Art

(2) Fuses are used in many products to avoid current surges and to prevent or reduce the damage that overcurrent may cause. The traditional thermal-based fuses used in the automotive field are generally low in accuracy and response time.

(3) The low accuracy and high spread response time can result in damage to loads and series path components (e.g., wiring, semiconductors, and connectors). To reduce or avoid such damage, manufacturers may design the system with additional safety margins for components, which increases cost, weight (e.g., indirect fuel costs), and pollution (e.g., increasing CO2 emissions) of the vehicle.

(4) Traditional thermal-based fuses are designed for single-use protection against overcurrent events. That is, once such a fuse “blows,” it cannot be reset. Instead, the blown fuse is manually replaced with a new fuse.

BRIEF SUMMARY

(5) The present disclosure is generally directed to electronic fuse systems and devices in which the electronic fuse is operable to mimic the electrical characteristics of a traditional external fuse (e.g., a thermal fuse), but provides the significant advantage of being reusable, as opposed to traditional thermal fuses that can only be tripped or “blown” once and cannot be reused after such an event.

(6) The electronic fuse systems and devices provided herein may be utilized to protect any electrical circuitry, and in some embodiments, may be used or incorporated within an automobile. For example, the electronic fuse systems and devices provided herein may be used as fuses in the fuse box of a car or other vehicle.

(7) In various embodiments, the electronic fuse systems and devices include an external switch, such as an external MOSFET transistor that is operable to switch on and off current that is provided to a load through a cable. The external switch may be located within or otherwise electrically coupled to the cable. The cable electrically couples a power supply to the load. A gate driver within the electronic fuse device may be utilized to selectively control the switching on and off of the

external switch. The electronic fuse includes circuitry that senses a variety of parameters, and the sensed parameters are processed by circuitry within the electronic fuse in order to determine whether an overcurrent, overload, or other condition exists which could pose a safety issue or that otherwise may cause damage to the load **106**. In such a case, a microcontroller within the electronic fuse may control the gate driver to switch off the external switch, thereby protecting the load from the potentially unsafe condition.

(8) In some embodiments, the electronic fuse systems and devices include a shunt resistor that is configured to sense the current in the cable, and provides the sensed current to I²t function circuitry, which allows the electronic fuse systems and devices to mimic the actual electrical characteristics inside the cable.

(9) In some embodiments, the electronic fuse systems and devices are configured to count an amount of time within which a certain current is flowing through the cable, and in response to determining that the current flow has exceeded an allowable time, the external switch is switched off in order to interrupt the current and protect the cable and the load. In some embodiments, multiple thresholds are included and utilized by the electronic fuse systems and devices, and each of the thresholds may be associated with a current intensity and a corresponding duration that is allowable. This facilitates switching off currents at various intensities if they exceed their respective associated allowable duration. In some embodiments, the current may be immediately switched off if the current exceeds a threshold that is associated with immediate action (e.g., a threshold that represents current not be exceeded for any duration of time).

(10) In some embodiments, the electronic fuse systems and devices includes one or more resistors configured to sense the temperature of the external switch (which may be an external power MOSFET). If the sensed temperature is outside an allowed range (e.g., as determined by temperature monitoring or sensing circuitry within the electronic fuse), the electronic fuse may switch off the external switch. In some embodiments, the temperature is translated into a number or numerical value that may be interpreted by logic within the electronic fuse and utilized to control the switching off of the external switch.

(11) In some embodiments, the temperature sensing circuitry switches off the external switch when the sensed temperature reaches a temperature threshold, facilitates avoidance of operation of the external switch at temperatures which may cause unreliable or poor operation of the switch.

(12) In some embodiments, the temperature sensing circuitry may include an NTC (Negative Temperature Coefficient) thermistor, which is a variable resistor having a resistance that varies according to the temperature of the external switch.

(13) In some embodiments, the electronic fuse systems and devices include sensing circuitry configured to sense the drain-source voltage drop of the external switch, and if the drain-source voltage drop is outside of a normal operating range or outside of a range defined by one or more thresholds, then the electronic fuse may switch off the external switch. This facilitates avoidance of operation of the external switch in the saturation region. Avoiding operation in the saturation region is advantageous for power MOSFETs, as operation in the saturation region may result in undesirable power dissipation that could cause internal problems (such as internal or thermal focus problems) in the external switch or external power MOSFET. Accordingly, in some embodiments, the electronic fuse systems and devices provided herein are operable to ensure that the external switch or external power MOSFET operates only in the cut-off or triode regions.

(14) In some embodiments, the electronic fuse systems and devices provided herein include p-channel bypass circuitry which may be utilized to reduce power consumption. For example, if the load is turned off or otherwise is not drawing electrical current or power, it is very inefficient to keep the external power MOSFET switched on, as such operation of the external power MOSFET would result in power losses. The electronic fuse systems and devices include a small internal switch (or bypass MOSFET) that mimics the operation of the external power MOSFET when power of load is turned off, thereby resulting in reduced power losses. When the load is turned on,

the bypass MOSFET is turned off and the external power MOSFET is switched on for normal operations.

(15) In some embodiments, the electronic fuse systems and devices include self-test circuitry which may be used to control safety of the whole system. For example, if one or more components in the various sensing circuitry in sensing channels is not reliable or is inaccurate, it could result in faulty operation of the electronic fuse. The self-test circuitry allows the electronic fuse systems and devices to accurately determine such unreliable or inaccurate sensing functions, and facilitates corrective actions that may be taken in response to such determination.

(16) In one or more embodiments, the present disclosure provides an electronic fuse that includes current sensing circuitry configured to sense a current in a conductor coupled between a power supply and a load, and generate a current sensing signal indicative of the sensed current. I2t circuitry emulates an I2t curve of the conductor, and the I2t circuitry is configured to receive the current sensing signal and determine whether the sensed current exceeds the I2t curve of the conductor. The electronic fuse further includes at least one of: external MOSFET temperature sensing circuitry configured to sense a temperature of an external MOSFET coupled to the conductor; low current bypass circuitry configured to supply a reduced current to the load in a low power consumption mode during which the external MOSFET is in a non-conductive state; or desaturation sensing circuitry configured to sense a drain-source voltage of the external MOSFET.

(17) In one or more embodiments, the present disclosure provides a device that includes current sensing circuitry configured to sense a current in a conductor coupled between a power supply and a load, and generate a current sensing signal indicative of the sensed current. I2t circuitry is included that emulates an I2t curve of the conductor, and the I2t circuitry is configured to receive the current sensing signal and determine whether the sensed current exceeds the I2t curve of the conductor. The device further includes self-testing circuitry configured to test a current sensing function of the current sensing circuitry, and generate a test signal indicating a result of the test.

(18) In one or more embodiments, the present disclosure provides a system that includes a power supply, a load, and a conductor electrically coupled to the power supply and the load. Current sensing circuitry is configured to sense a current in the conductor, and generate a current sensing signal indicative of the sensed current. The system includes I2t circuitry that includes logic circuitry, counter circuitry, and latch-off circuitry. The logic circuitry is configured to compare the sensed current to a plurality of first thresholds, with each of the plurality of first thresholds being different from one another. The counter circuitry is configured to adjust a counting value speed and direction based on the comparison of the sensed current to each of the plurality of first thresholds, and generate an overflow signal in response to the counting value reaching or exceeding a threshold counting value. The latch-off circuitry includes a comparator configured to compare the sensed current to a second threshold, and generate an interrupt signal in response to the sensed current exceeding the second threshold.

(19) In one or more embodiments, a method includes sensing, with current sensing circuitry, a current in a conductor coupled between a power supply and a load and generating a current sensing signal indicative of the sensed current. The method includes emulating, with current squared times time (I2t) circuitry, an I2t curve of the conductor and determining whether the sensed current exceeds the I2t curve of the conductor. The method includes testing, with self-testing circuitry, a current sensing function of the current sensing circuitry and generating a test signal indicating a result of the test.

Description

BRIEF DESCRIPTION OF THE SEVERAL VIEWS OF THE DRAWINGS

(1) In the drawings, identical reference numbers identify similar elements or acts unless the context

indicates otherwise. The sizes and relative positions of elements in the drawings are not necessarily drawn to scale. For example, the shapes of various elements and angles are not necessarily drawn to scale, and some of these elements are arbitrarily enlarged and positioned to improve drawing legibility. Further, the particular shapes of the elements as drawn are not necessarily intended to convey any information regarding the actual shape of the particular elements, and have been solely selected for ease of recognition in the drawings.

(2) FIG. 1 is a schematic block diagram illustrating an electronic fuse (eFuse) system, in accordance with one or more embodiments.

(3) FIG. 2 is a schematic block diagram illustrating a high level view of the current sensing subsystem of the system shown in FIG. 1, in accordance with one or more embodiments.

(4) FIG. 3 is a schematic block diagram illustrating further details of the current sensing subsystem of FIG. 2, in accordance with one or more embodiments.

(5) FIG. 4 is a schematic diagram illustrating the I2t functionality of the system shown in FIG. 1, in accordance with one or more embodiments.

(6) FIG. 5 is a schematic diagram illustrating further details of the I2t digital function circuitry of FIG. 4, in accordance with one or more embodiments.

(7) FIG. 6 is a schematic diagram illustrating further details of the low current bypass subsystem of the system shown in FIG. 1, in accordance with one or more embodiments.

(8) FIG. 7 is a schematic diagram illustrating further details of the Vds sensing circuitry of the low current bypass subsystem of FIG. 5, in accordance with one or more embodiments.

(9) FIG. 8 is a schematic diagram illustrating further details of the external MOSFET desaturation sensing subsystem of the system shown in FIG. 1, in accordance with one or more embodiments.

(10) FIG. 9 is a schematic diagram illustrating the desaturation sensing subsystem of the system shown in FIG. 1, and corresponding desaturation sensing circuitry in the logic including self-test features, in accordance with one or more embodiments.

(11) FIG. 10 is a schematic diagram illustrating further details of the self-test features shown in FIG. 9, in accordance with one or more embodiments.

(12) FIG. 11 is a schematic diagram illustrating further details of the external MOSFET over-temperature shutdown features of the system shown in FIG. 1, in accordance with one or more embodiments.

(13) FIG. 12 is a schematic diagram illustrating further details of the NTC resistor sense circuitry, the NTC level shifter circuitry, and the temperature monitoring circuitry of the external MOSFET over-temperature shutdown features shown in FIG. 11, in accordance with one or more embodiments.

(14) FIGS. 13A and 13B are graphs representing possible behaviors of embodiments of the present description in the presence of a current varying continuously over time, in accordance with one or more embodiments.

(15) FIGS. 14A and 14B are graphs representing possible behaviors of embodiments of the present description in the presence of a pulsed current, in accordance with one or more embodiments.

(16) FIGS. 15-17 are diagrams exemplary of criteria underlying one or more embodiments.

(17) FIGS. 18A and 18B each include three superposed diagrams with a common time scale exemplifying the possible behavior of a circuit according to one or more embodiments.

(18) FIG. 19 is a graph associated with one or more counters, in accordance with one or more embodiments.

(19) FIG. 20 is a block diagram of a system incorporating a circuit, in accordance with one or more embodiments.

(20) FIG. 21 is a functional block diagram of a system which may employ a current absorption management circuit, in accordance with one or more embodiments.

(21) FIG. 22 is a block diagram of a circuit, in accordance with one or more embodiments.

(22) FIG. 23 is a flow-chart, in accordance with one or more embodiments.

- (23) FIG. 24 is a block diagram of a circuit, in accordance with one or more embodiments.
- (24) FIGS. 25A and 25B are functional block diagrams, in accordance with one or more embodiments.
- (25) FIG. 26 is a functional block diagram, in accordance with one or more embodiments.
- (26) FIG. 27 is a diagram exemplary of possible operation of a test sequencer, in accordance with one or more embodiments.
- (27) FIG. 28 is a graph exemplary of possible operation of a finite state machine (FSM), in accordance with one or more embodiments.
- (28) FIG. 29 is a combined graph/flowchart exemplary of performing tests, in accordance with one or more embodiments.
- (29) FIG. 30 illustrates a device including a circuit configured to determine the temperature of a transistor, in accordance with one or more embodiments.
- (30) FIG. 31 illustrates another embodiment of a device including a circuit configured to determine the temperature of a transistor, in accordance with one or more embodiments.
- (31) FIG. 32 illustrates in more detail an example of implementation of the embodiment of FIG. 31, in accordance with one or more embodiments.
- (32) FIG. 33 illustrates another embodiment of a device including a circuit configured to determine the temperature of a transistor, in accordance with one or more embodiments.
- (33) FIG. 34 illustrates in more detail components associated with FIGS. 30-31, in accordance with one or more embodiments.
- (34) FIG. 35 illustrates another embodiment of a device including a circuit configured to determine the temperature of a transistor, in accordance with one or more embodiments.
- (35) FIG. 36 illustrates an NTC bridge, in accordance with one or more embodiments.

DETAILED DESCRIPTION

- (36) In the following description, certain specific details are set forth in order to provide a thorough understanding of various disclosed embodiments. However, one skilled in the relevant art will recognize that embodiments may be practiced without one or more of these specific details, or with other methods, components, materials, etc.
- (37) Unless the context indicates otherwise, throughout the specification and claims that follow, the word “comprise” and variations thereof, such as “comprises” and “comprising” are to be construed in an open, inclusive sense, that is, as “including, but not limited to.” Further, the terms “first,” “second,” and similar indicators of sequence are to be construed as being interchangeable unless the context clearly dictates otherwise.
- (38) Reference throughout the specification to “one embodiment” or “an embodiment” means that a particular feature, structure, or characteristic described in connection with the embodiment is included in at least one embodiment. Thus, the appearance of the phrases “in one embodiment” or “in an embodiment” in various places throughout the specification are not necessarily all referring to the same embodiment. Furthermore, the particular features, structures, or characteristics may be combined in any suitable manner in one or more embodiments of the present disclosure.
- (39) As used in this specification and the appended claims, the singular forms “a,” “an,” and “the” include plural referents unless the content clearly dictates otherwise. It should also be noted that the term “or” is generally employed in its broadest sense, that is, as meaning “and/or” unless the content clearly dictates otherwise.
- (40) The headings and Abstract of the Disclosure provided herein are for convenience only and do not interpret the scope or meaning of the embodiments.
- (41) In recent years, electronic systems have emerged to replace traditional fuses, but most such solutions have been proposed using a discrete approach. Alongside these discrete solutions, some integrated solutions have begun to appear. However, the discrete approach typically implement a relatively large printed circuit board (PCB) with several components to replace a single fuse, while the integrated solutions have a very limited flexibility and fail to emulate the operating principle

based on the physical relationship I^2t . I^2t is current squared times time. This is an electrical quantity that is used to determine energy to a protective device, such as a circuit breaker or fuse.

(42) An electronic fuse (or “eFuse”) with high accuracy and low response time increases the safety of system and reduces the need to over design components and the manual replacing is needed.

(43) FIG. 1 is a block diagram illustrating an electronic fuse (eFuse) system **100**, in accordance with one or more embodiments. The system **100** may include or be implemented in any device or circuitry in order to provide overcurrent protection. For example, the system **100** may monitor electrical characteristics (e.g., current, voltage, or the like) between a power supply **108** and a load **106**, and may protect the load **106** from overcurrent conditions that otherwise may cause damage to the load **106**.

(44) The power supply **108** may be any electrical power source, and in some embodiments, the power supply **108** includes one or more batteries. The load **106** may be any electrical component or portion of a circuit that receives or consumes electrical power, such as may be provided by the power supply **108**. In some embodiments, the power supply **108** may be an automobile battery and the load **106** may be one or more electrical circuits in the automobile that is electrically connected to the power supply **108** via the cable **102**, which may be a wiring harness or other electrical cable or conductor. The power supply **108** may have an output voltage that is greater than 10 V in some embodiments, greater than 20 V in some embodiments, and greater than 40 V in some embodiments. For example, in various embodiments, the power supply **108** may be a 12 V battery, a 24 V battery, or a 48 V battery.

(45) The system **100** includes an electronic fuse **110** that is electrically coupled between the power supply **108** and the load **106**. For example, the electronic fuse **110** may be electrically coupled to a cable **102** that is connected to the power supply **108** and the load **106**. In some embodiments, the electronic fuse **110** may be electrically coupled to a wire or conductive element that is electrically coupled to the power supply at one end and is electrically coupled to the cable **102** at another end.

(46) As will be described in further detail herein, the electronic fuse **110** is configured to detect and react to overcurrent and overvoltage conditions. When an overload condition occurs, the electronic fuse **110** limits the output current to a safe value, which in some embodiments may be defined by a user. If the overload condition persists, the electronic fuse **110** may control a switching element **104** to go into a non-conductive or open state, thereby electrically disconnecting the load **106** from the power supply **108**. In some embodiments, the switching element **104** may be a transistor, such as a MOSFET transistor, and may be referred to herein as “external power MOSFET **M0**,” as labeled in FIG. 1. While the switching element **104** may be described herein as an external power MOSFET, it should be readily appreciated that this is provided as an example, and other types of transistors (including JFET, BJT, IGBT, and using different materials other than silicon like Silicon Carbide or Gallium Nitride) may be utilized as the switching element **104** and driven in accordance with some embodiments.

(47) In some embodiments, the electronic fuse **110** is a single or unitary device, such as a single chip or electronic package. For example, as shown in FIG. 1, the electronic fuse **110** may be a single electronic package including a plurality of pins or electrical leads configured to electrically couple the electronic fuse **110** to electrical elements which may be external to the package. The electronic fuse **110** includes a number of subsystems, each of which includes electrical circuitry for monitoring or controlling particular aspects or characteristics which may be associated with an overload condition between the power supply **108** and the load **106**.

(48) In some embodiments, the electronic fuse **110** includes a current sensing subsystem **112** (which may include corresponding self-test circuitry **113**), an external MOSFET temperature sensing subsystem **114**, a gate driver **116**, a low current bypass subsystem **118**, and a desaturation sensing subsystem **120** (which may include corresponding self-test circuitry **119**). Each of these subsystems may be or include circuitry that is configured to perform the various functions described herein with respect to the subsystems. In some embodiments, one or more of the

subsystems may be implemented as circuitry in an integrated circuit, a microprocessor, or the like. (49) A digital core **122** (which may be referred to herein as logic **122**), is included within the electronic fuse **110** and is communicatively coupled to each of the subsystems described herein. More particularly, the logic **122** is configured to receive sensing signals or data from the subsystems and to control operations of the switching element **104** in response to the received sensing signals or data. For example, the logic **122** may include circuitry that is utilized to determine whether an overload, overcurrent, over temperature, saturation threshold, or other condition exists which may be undesirable to deliver to the load **106**, and the logic **122** may switch off the switching element **104** thereby protecting the load **106** from such condition.

(50) In some embodiments, the logic **122** may further include registers **126**. The registers **126** may include any circuitry configured to implement one or more registers and to carry out any of the associated functionalities as described in further detail herein. In some embodiments, the registers **126** may include digital circuitry (e.g., a cascade of flip-flops, or the like) that implements one or more shift registers. In some embodiments, the logic **122** may further include computer-readable memory configured to store data.

(51) As shown in FIG. 1, in some embodiments, the logic **122** includes I2t function circuitry **124**, self-test circuitry **128** (which may be utilized for self-test functionality of any of the various subsystems, as will be described in further detail herein), p-channel bypass circuitry **130**, desaturation sensing circuitry **132**, and temperature monitoring circuitry **134**, each of which will be described in further detail herein.

(52) FIG. 2 is a block diagram illustrating a high level view of the current sensing subsystem **112**. As shown in FIG. 2, the current sensing subsystem **112** includes current sensing circuitry **136** that senses the current $I_{sub.OUT}$ flowing through an external shunt resistor R_{sht} , which in turn is the current flowing through the external power MOSFET **M0** (which may be, for example, the current supplied to the load **106**). The current sensing circuitry **136** generates a voltage $V_{sub.0}$ indicative of the current $I_{sub.OUT}$. The current sensing subsystem **112** further includes an analog-to-digital converter (ADC) **138** that converts the sensed value $V_{sub.0}$ to digital data representative or otherwise associated with the sensed current, and provides this digital data to the I2t function circuitry **124** in order to perform the electronic fuse functionality as described herein.

(53) In some embodiments, the current sensing subsystem **112** includes corresponding self-test circuitry **113** and the logic **122** may include corresponding self-test circuitry **128** for testing the current sensing functionality as described in further detail herein.

(54) FIG. 3 is a schematic block diagram illustrating further details of the current sensing subsystem **112**, in accordance with some embodiments. The current $I_{sub.OUT}$ flowing through the external power MOSFET **M0** is monitored by means of the external shunt resistor R_{sht} . The current sensing subsystem **112** (e.g., the current sensing circuitry **136**) senses the floating voltage drop V_{shunt} across the shunt resistor R_{sht} and transfers or converts the sensed voltage drop to a voltage $V_{sub.O}$, which may be referenced to ground. An operational amplifier **244** operably maintains the voltage drop across an internal resistor R_{i1} at a voltage that is the same as the voltage drop across the shunt resistor R_{sht} . Accordingly, the current flowing in the resistor R is $I_{sense} = V_{shunt} / R_{i1}$, while the current flowing in the shunt resistor R_{sht} (and through the load **106**) is V_{shunt} / R_{sht} . To minimize the impact of the measurement on the actual I_{out} current, the resistance of the internal resistor is significantly greater than the resistance of the shunt resistor R_{sht} (e.g., $R_{i1} \gg R_{sht}$). In some embodiments, the internal resistor R_{i1} has a resistance that is at least 100 times greater than the resistance of the shunt resistor R_{sht} . In some embodiments, the internal resistor has a resistance that is at least 1,000 times greater than the resistance of the shunt resistor R_{sht} . In some embodiments, the internal resistor has a resistance that is at least 10,000 times greater than the resistance of the shunt resistor R_{sht} .

(55) The voltage drop $V_{sub.0}$ across a second internal resistor R_{i2} is $10 * V_{shunt}$, thereby providing a gain factor of 10. The gain factor 10 is provided as just one example, and other gain factors may

be utilized in various embodiments. In some embodiments, the second internal resistor R_{i2} has a resistance that is ten times the resistance of the internal resistor R_{i1} ; however, embodiments are not limited thereto and other ratios of resistance between the internal resistor R_{i1} and the second internal resistor R_{i2} may be implemented in accordance with various embodiments.

(56) The voltage drop $V_{sub.0}$ across the second internal resistor R_{i2} (e.g., $10 \cdot V_{shunt}$) is continuously sampled according to a given sample frequency by the ADC **138** and the stream of sampled data are passed to the I2t function circuitry **124** to perform the electronic fuse functionality. In particular the voltage drop $V_{sub.0}$ across the second internal resistor R_{i2} may be converted by means of two different ADCs (both of which may be included as part of the current sense ADC **138**, in some embodiments). For example, the current sensing subsystem **112** may include a successive-approximation ADC (SAR ADC) **140** and a sigma delta ADC **142**. In some embodiments, the SAR ADC **140** has a sample rate of 909 kHz and its output is processed with a moving average of 50 samples and then is sent as input to the I2t function circuitry **124** of the logic **122** (which will be described in further detail later herein). The sigma delta ADC **142**, in some embodiments, may be slower but more accurate than the SAR ADC **140**. The sigma delta ADC **142** may be used to update a status register readable from a microcontroller (e.g., microcontroller **105**) in order to provide an accurate information about the current flowing through the power path.

(57) In some embodiments, the current sense subsystem **112** includes corresponding self-test circuitry **113**. The current sense subsystem **112** may be operable to initiate or otherwise be placed in a self-test state, which is a safety state to improve reliability of the system. When the self-test state is enabled by the microcontroller **105**, several actions are taken inside the system **100**, including: the external power MOSFET M_0 is turned off in order to cut-off the current through the power path (e.g., to interrupt current to the load **106**); a current source or current generator ($I_{sub.1}$) is enabled; and a switch ($SW_{sub.1}$) is closed. These actions create a current which flows from the power supply **108** to the current generator **11**, thereby creating a voltage drop across the external shunt resistor R_{sht} and a test resistor $R_{sub.test}$. The test resistor $R_{sub.test}$ may have a resistance selected to make the voltage drop across the shunt resistor R_{sht} negligible with respect to the voltage drop across the test resistor $R_{sub.test}$, for example, by selecting values for the test resistor $R_{sub.test}$ and the external shunt resistor R_{sht} in order to satisfy the relationship $R_{sub.test} \gg R_{sht}$. In some embodiments, the test resistor $R_{sub.test}$ has a resistance that is at least 100 times greater than the resistance of the shunt resistor R_{sht} . In some embodiments, the test resistor $R_{sub.test}$ has a resistance that is at least 1,000 times greater than the resistance of the shunt resistor R_{sht} . In some embodiments, the test resistor $R_{sub.test}$ has a resistance that is at least 10,000 times greater than the resistance of the shunt resistor R_{sht} .

(58) In this condition (e.g., in the self-test mode), the current sensing subsystem **112** senses mainly the voltage drop across the test resistor $R_{sub.test}$, that is $I_{sub.1} \cdot R_{sub.test}$, which may have a value that is known in advance (e.g., being known by the designed or selected $I_{sub.1}$ and $R_{sub.test}$ values), and the voltage drop across the test resistor $R_{sub.test}$ then is transferred to a voltage $V_{sub.0}$ that is referenced to ground and converted by the SAR ADC **140** to a digital voltage (which may be referred to herein as a self-test digital voltage).

(59) The converted digital voltage may be provided to the self-test circuitry **128** within the logic **122**. The self-test circuitry **128** includes a first comparator **144**, a second comparator **146**, and an OR gate **148**. The self-test circuitry **128** also receives or generates first and second thresholds V_{thh} , V_{th1} (for example $V_{thh} > V_{th1}$). The first and second thresholds V_{thh} , V_{th1} may have respective voltage levels that may have any selected value in various embodiments, and may be selected based on design considerations. The first comparator **144** receives V_{thh} on its inverting input and receives the digital voltage from the SAR ADC **140** on its noninverting input. The second comparator **146** receives V_{th1} on its noninverting input and receives the digital voltage from the SAR ADC **140** on its inverting input.

(60) The self-test circuitry **128** may determine whether the converted digital voltage is within a

range between the first and second thresholds (e.g., within the range $[V_{th1}, V_{thh}]$), for example, by comparing the self-test digital voltage with the first and second thresholds. If the self-test digital voltage is at a voltage level that is between the first and second thresholds, this may indicate that the whole current sense path is not degraded or is within an acceptable tolerance. On the other hand, if the self-test digital voltage is at a voltage level that is greater than the first threshold V_{thh} or that is less than the second threshold V_{th1} , then this may indicate that the current sense path is degraded and thus the current sensing function of the current sensing subsystem **112** may not be accurate.

(61) In some embodiments, the first and second thresholds may be voltage thresholds that are provided as reference voltage inputs to respective comparators, as shown in FIG. **3**. The self-test circuitry **128** may further include one or more logic gates, such as the OR gate **148** as shown. In some embodiments, the first and second thresholds may be voltage thresholds that are provided as reference voltage inputs to the comparators, as shown, and the comparators provide an output based on the comparisons to the logic gate (e.g., an OR gate). The logic gate receives the output comparison signals and outputs a test signal indicating a result of the self-test (e.g., pass or fail).

(62) In the event that the self-test digital voltage is at a voltage level that is between the first and second thresholds, the self-test circuitry **128** performs a logical function (e.g., OR-ing) based on the output of the two comparators (e.g., outputs indicative of the comparisons of the self-test digital voltage with the first and second thresholds) and will provide a resulting test signal flagging that the test is passed. On the other hand, if the self-test digital voltage is outside the acceptable range $[V_{th1}, V_{thh}]$ then the logic circuitry performing the OR-ing of the two comparisons will provide a resulting test signal flagging that the test is failed.

(63) In some embodiments, the test signal is stored in a computer-readable memory or a dedicated status register (e.g., in the registers **126**) that can be read by the microcontroller **105** through a communication interface **107**. As described, the self-test circuitry **128** may be additional circuitry without modifying the analog and digital chain of current sensing in the current sensing subsystem **112**. In some embodiments, any time output from one or both of the ADCs **140**, **142** are ready (e.g., when output data is present) they may be written in respective status registers bits (e.g., in the registers **126**), and the microcontroller **105** may be advised or notified (e.g., via a signal indicating that new output data is available) such that the microcontroller **105** can read them through the communication interface **107**. The microcontroller **105** may write data in a specific register (e.g., 1 bit) to command the electronic fuse **110** to perform the current sense self-test. The result of the self-test may be stored in a dedicated status register (e.g., within the registers **126**) that can be read by a microcontroller **105** through the communication interface **107**. As such, the microcontroller **105** can both command the electronic fuse **110** to perform the self-test and can read the result of the self-test via the registers **126**.

(64) In some embodiments, the first threshold V_{thh} may be provided as a first reference voltage at an inverting input ($-$) of the first comparator **144**, and the self-test digital voltage is provided at the non-inverting input ($+$) of the first comparator **144**. As such, the first comparator **144** outputs a logical high (or “1”) in response to the self-test digital voltage being greater than the voltage level of the first threshold. The second threshold V_{th1} may be provided as a second reference voltage at a non-inverting input ($+$) of the second comparator **146**, and the self-test digital voltage is provided at the inverting input ($-$) of the second comparator **146**. As such, the second comparator **146** outputs a logical high (or “1”) in response to the self-test digital voltage being less than the voltage level of the second threshold. The OR gate **148** thus outputs a logical high (or “1”) indicating that the self-test is failed if either of the outputs of the first and second comparators are high, thereby indicating that the self-test digital voltage is either higher than the first threshold V_{thh} or lower than the second threshold V_{th1} .

(65) FIG. **4** illustrates a high level circuit schematic of an electrical system **150**, according to one or more embodiments of the present disclosure. The electrical system **150** includes a whole I2t

subsystem **152**. FIG. **4** illustrates the connections between the I2t subsystem **152** and other components of electrical system **150** that the I2t subsystem interacts with for performing its function, according to one or more embodiments of the present disclosure. The electrical system **150** may be one example of the system **100** of FIG. **1**. The I2t subsystem **152** of the system **150** be at least partially incorporated in or implemented by the I2t function circuitry **124** or the current sense subsystem **112**, as shown in FIG. **1**.

(66) With reference to FIG. **4**, in some embodiments, an I cable overcurrent protection subsystem (or overcurrent protection circuitry) is implemented in order to perform the electronic fuse functionality. The I2t curve of the power cable **102** is emulated through the I2t subsystem **152** by monitoring the current I_{cable} through the cable **102**, comparing the current I_{cable} with a plurality of thresholds, and configuring the counting speed and counting direction of a digital counter **154** based on the value of the current intensity I_{cable} that flows through the cable **102**. An overflow event of the digital counter **154** or value of the digital counter **154** reaching a predetermined or selected maximum counting value event may indicate that the I2t curve of power cable **102** has been exceeded. The digital counter overflow signal or the event that the value of the digital counter reached the predetermined or selected maximum counting value, may be used to stop or limit the current I_{cable} to protect power cable **102**, for example, by controlling an external power MOSFET **M0 156** also referred as power switch **156**. In some embodiments, the power switch **156** may be the same switching element **104** as shown and described with respect to FIG. **1**.

(67) It will be readily appreciated that one or more of the components or features of the I2t subsystem **152** shown in FIG. **4** may be the same or substantially the same as corresponding features of the system **100** previously described herein with respect to FIG. **1**. For example, the power supply **108**, the cable **102**, the load **106**, the shunt resistor R_{sht} , and the power switch **104**, **156** may be the same as previously described herein.

(68) Electrical system **150** includes the power supply **108**, the I2t subsystem **152**, the power cable **102**, and the load **106**. The I2t subsystem **152** includes the power switch **156**, a gate driver **160** (which may be the same as the gate driver **116** shown in FIG. **1**), a shunt resistor R_{sht} , a current sense circuit **158** (which may be the same or substantially the same as the current sensing circuitry or current sensing subsystem **112** previously described herein), and I2t digital function circuitry **164** (which may be the same or substantially the same as the I2t function circuitry **124** shown in FIG. **1**). The I2t digital function circuitry **164** in turn includes thresholds & logic circuitry **162**, digital counter **154**, and a clock or oscillator **166**.

(69) During normal operation, power switch **156** is closed, and current I_{cable} may flow from power supply **108**, through the shunt resistor R_{sht} and power cable **102** and into the load **106**. The current sense circuit **158** senses current I_{cable} , for example, by measuring a voltage across resistor R_{sht} . For example, the current sense circuit **158** may be the same or substantially the same as the current sensing circuitry or current sensing subsystem **112** previously described herein.

(70) Threshold & logic circuit **162** includes a plurality of thresholds and periodically or continuously compares the sensed current I_{cable} with each of the plurality of thresholds. According to the value of the current intensity I_{cable} sensed by the current sense circuit **158**, the thresholds & logic circuit **162** configures or causes the digital counter **154** to count up, count down, or stop counting. The speed and direction in which the digital counter **154** counts depends on the value of the current intensity I_{cable} sensed by the current sense circuit **158**. An overflow of digital counter **154** may be used as a trigger to control the power switch **156** to stop or limit current I_{cable} , for example, by opening the power switch **156** or otherwise controlling the power switch **156** to go into a non-conductive state (e.g., by outputting an overflow signal to the gate driver **160**, which controls the power switch **156** to open in response to receiving the overflow signal). In some embodiments, a predetermined or selected maximum counting value may be stored, for example, in non-volatile memory or in a register, such that reaching the predetermined or selected maximum counting value may be used as a trigger to control the power switch **156** to stop or limit current

Icable.

(71) The counting speed of the digital counter **154** may be controlled in a variety of ways, in accordance with various embodiments. For example, in some embodiments, a counting step (or counting value) that gets added to accumulator **168** every clock cycle may be changed depending on the value of the current intensity I_{cable} sensed by the current sense circuit **158**. A very high current I_{cable} may correspond to a large counting step, a high current I_{cable} may correspond to a small counting step, and a low current I_{cable} may correspond to a negative counting step, in other words, a decrement of accumulator **168**.

(72) In some embodiments, the frequency of the oscillator **166**, which determines a frequency of adding counting steps (e.g., how fast a counting step gets added to accumulator **168**), may be changed depending on the value of the current intensity I_{cable} sensed by the current sense circuit **158**. For example, keeping the counting step size (or counting value) constant, a very high current I_{cable} may correspond to a fast clock frequency while signaling digital counter **154** to count up, a high current I_{cable} may correspond to a slow clock frequency while signaling digital counter **154** to count up, and a low current I_{cable} may correspond to a slow clock frequency while signaling digital counter **154** to count down. That is, the oscillator **166** may have a frequency that is variable based on the measured current intensity I_{cable} , such that the counting frequency and therefore the accumulated count value varies based on the current intensity I_{cable} .

(73) In some embodiments, the counting step and the clock frequency may be concurrently varied. In some embodiments, a plurality of counting up and counting down speeds may be implemented by the I2t digital function circuitry **164**.

(74) The threshold & logic circuit **162** includes a plurality of thresholds that are compared with the value of the current intensity I_{cable} sensed by the current sense circuit **158**. Based on a comparison of the value of the current intensity I_{cable} sensed by the current sense circuit **158** to the plurality of thresholds, a counting step option for the digital counter **154** may be selected or enabled. In various embodiments, the counting step options may include counting up or down, and may further include the speed (e.g., a variable or selected speed) of the counting. The counting speed of the digital counter **154** may have a direct impact on how fast the digital counter **154** overflows or the digital counter value reaches the predetermined or selected maximum counting value. Thresholds may be selected to accurately emulate an I2t curve of power cable **102**. For example, the thresholds may be programmed or otherwise selected as may be desired in order to accurately emulate the I2t curve of the power cable **102**.

(75) The digital counter **154** may be used as a counter and accumulator, in some embodiments. The digital counter **154** may be capable of counting up and down, and may have a configurable counting step size. A counting step size may be configured, for example, by using two configuration bits, leading to four different counting speeds that may be implemented by the digital counter **154**; however, embodiments are not limited thereto. In some embodiments, the counting step size may be represented or controlled by only one configuration bit, or may have more than two configuration bits. Other embodiments may not have a configuration bit and, instead, may have a single counting step size. Not all available counting step size may be used in some embodiments.

(76) In some embodiments, the input frequency of current profile digital counter **154** may also be varied to control the counting speed. Some embodiments may use a hybrid approach, in which the input frequency is varied concurrently with the counting step size.

(77) The digital counter **154** may also include accumulator **168**, which increments or decrements each clock cycle depending on the counting step size and the direction of the count.

(78) As shown in FIG. 4, an additional overcurrent protection circuit hard-short latch-off circuit **170** may be included in the overcurrent protection I2t subsystem **152**. In detail as shown, the current I_{cable} may be sensed and compared with a specific settable threshold $T_{sub.hs}$ representing an upper limit of the current I_{cable} that the cable **102** can withstand and that is not to be exceeded. In case the sensed value of the current I_{cable} exceeds the threshold $T_{sub.hs}$ value, this event

immediately triggers the command to the gate driver **160** to turn off the power switch **156**, causing the interruption of the current flowing in the cable and irrespective of the status of the digital counter **154**. That is, as shown in FIG. 4, an output of the digital counter **154** may be provided as a first input to a logic gate (e.g., an OR gate, as shown) and an output of a comparator of the latch-off circuit **170** may be provided as a second input to the OR gate. As such, the gate driver **160** may be controlled to open the power switch **156** in response to either the sensed current I_{cable} exceeding the threshold $T_{\text{sub.hs}}$ or in response to an output of the I2t digital function circuitry **164** (e.g., an output of the digital counter **154**). This provides protection against instantaneous current spikes that exceed a threshold current that can be safely withstood by the cable **102**, and further provides I2t emulation of the cable **102** thereby facilitating switching-off of the power switch **156** in response to the current I_{cable} exceeding the I2t curve of the cable **102**.

(79) FIG. 5 is a schematic diagram illustrating further details of the I2t digital function circuitry **164**, in accordance with some embodiments. In FIG. 5, reference **172** denotes as a whole a circuit according to one or more embodiments corresponding to the I2t digital function circuitry **164** of FIG. 4. In one or more embodiments as shown in FIG. 5, the circuit **172** includes four circuit sections, namely: a comparator circuit section **174**, a logic circuit section **176**, a section **178** performing scaled counter up/fixed drop down functions, and a latch section **180**.

(80) While exemplified as separate sections for the sake of simplicity and ease of description, one or more of the sections **174** to **180** discussed herein may be either integrated to a higher-level circuit sections or subdivided into circuit sub-sections according to desired implementation options. Also, in one or more embodiments, certain elements exemplified herein as parts of the circuit sections **174** to **180** may be implemented as external elements. Similarly, in one or more embodiments, the circuit **172** may include further elements in addition to those exemplified herein.

(81) In some embodiments, the comparator circuit section **174** may include an input **182** configured to receive an input signal $IN1$ indicative of the current flowing through a wire W (for instance, the cable **102** which in some embodiments may be an automotive wiring harness). The wire W may have associated a load L (which may be the same as the load **106** previously described herein) and is to be protected against overload and/or short circuit events.

(82) In the diagram of FIG. 5, reference S denotes an amperometric sensor (of any type) configured to generate a sensing signal $KS \cdot I_{\text{sub.WIRE}}(t)$ indicative of the intensity $I_{\text{sub.WIRE}}(t)$ of the current flowing through the wire W .

(83) As shown in FIG. 5, the sensor S can be coupled to a setting circuit block IS active between the sensor S and the input **182** so that a normalized value for the current through the wire W , namely $I_{\text{sub.WIRE}}(t)/INOM$ may be applied to the input **182**.

(84) In one or more embodiments, the value for $INOM$ can thus be set (selectively, for instance) at a nominal value for the current $I_{\text{sub.WIRE}}(t)$.

(85) In that way, the circuit **172** may be configured to operate as a sort of “universal” fuse adapted to latch (that is interrupt or at least reduce) the current through the wire W as a result of current being found to reach a safety threshold defined as a function of a (first) setting parameter represented by $INOM$.

(86) It will be appreciated that both the sensor S and the circuit block IS for setting the nominal value $INOM$ for the current may be distinct elements from some embodiments.

(87) In one or more embodiments, the comparator circuit section **174** may include a bank of comparators $C1, \dots, Cn$ (collectively indicated as **184**) configured to compare the (normalized) current value $I_{\text{sub.WIRE}}(t)/INOM$ with respective comparison levels or thresholds $K1, \dots, Kn$ which may be calculated as discussed in the following and stored in respective registers in a bank of registers indicated collectively as **190**.

(88) For instance, the thresholds $K1, \dots, Kn$ can be set in such a way to produce a correspondence between the number of thresholds and the number of bits associated with a bank of D registers **186** as discussed in the following.

(89) In one or more embodiments, the value for $K1$ can be set by convention to unity ($K1=K_{ref}*KT=1$, where KT is a constant defined such that $K_{ref}=1/KT$ corresponds to the maximum DC current $INOM$ permissible to flow through the wire) by referring to a normalized current $I_{sub.WIRE}(t)/INOM$.

(90) Also, normalization may be effected with reference to $KT*I_{sub.WIRE}(t)/INOM$ with $KT \neq 1$ and the K values correspondingly set as $(1*KT, K2*KT, K_n*KT)$. This implementation can be advantageous when the reference are analog values (voltage), so that a highest (maximum) value can be set for K_n*KT which is compatible with the highest analog value that can be fixed in the associated IC: for instance $K_n*KT < 5$ if the maximum allowed reference value is 5.

(91) The logic circuit section **176** may include a combinatorial network including a plurality of stages collectively indicated as **188** which sense the respective outputs of the comparators $C1, C2, \dots, C_n$ and identify the position of (normalized) current value $I_{sub.WIRE}(t)/INOM$ within the (one-dimensional) matrix $[K1, K2, \dots, K_n]$ of the reference thresholds **190** so that one of the outputs of the logic circuit section **176** is set to a given value, such as $logic_out(I)=1$ corresponding to $KI-1 < I_{sub.WIRE}(t)/INOM < KI$, with I designating the I -th reference threshold in the matrix $[K1, K2, \dots, K_n]$ while the other logic outputs are set to another value, for instance zero.

(92) Setting of the thresholds may occur on the basis of the criteria discussed, for example, with reference to FIGS. 15-17.

(93) The circuit block **178** operates with a fixed clock frequency provided by a clock circuit block **1782** (here exemplified as included in the circuit section **178**) and includes an input bank of flip-flops D (collectively indicated as **186**) which are driven by respective outputs of the logic circuit block **188**.

(94) The output of the flip-flop bank **186** may thus include an n -bit binary word used to drive a (fixed drop) counter **192**.

(95) In some embodiments, the counter **192** performs a cumulative adder function via an adder circuit **194** and the memory delay $(z-1)$ designated **196**. This is a configuration for such digital circuitry where the block **178** $(z-1)$ is a memory for the current cumulative result.

(96) In some embodiments, the counter **192** is driven to count “up” by the word at the output of the flip-flop register **186** (at a “+” input at the top of the block **194** in FIG. 5). The counter **192** is driven to either decrease its count by a fixed drop (as provided by a drop circuit block **198**) or to maintain the current count value (0 drop as exemplified by a block **200**) as a function of the position of a switch **202** which couples to a negative count input “-” of the adder circuit **194** either the output of the fixed drop circuit **198** or the output of the zero drop circuit block **200**.

(97) Operation of the switch **202** is controlled by an AND logic gate **204** which in turn receives the outputs of a first equality block **208** and a “greater than” circuit block **212**.

(98) The first equality block **208** is sensitive to the output from the flip-flop register **186** and a first zero reference block **210**.

(99) The “greater than” circuit block **212** is in turn sensitive to the input from another zero reference block **214** and the output from the adder circuit **194**.

(100) As discussed previously, the delay block **196** $(z-1)$ is a memory block that stores the output of the adder **194** and feeds this value back to the input of the adder, thus implementing a cumulative adder with digital circuitry (essentially as a digital integrator).

(101) In some embodiments, the circuit block **178** as shown in FIG. 5 may be operated such that when $I_{sub.WIRE}(t)/INOM$ is higher than 1, that is, as a result of $I_{sub.WIRE}(t)$ having reached a threshold value $INOM$ set via the parameter $INOM$, the flip-flop corresponding to the I -th D register in the bank **186** is clocked to one so that the value of the register **186** is $2^{sup.I}$ and the count of the counter **192** is varied in a first direction, e.g., “up”, by increasing the count by $2^{sup.I}$, so that the increase in the count is indicative of “how much” $I_{sub.WIRE}(t)$ is higher than $INOM$. If $D=0$, that is, as a result of $I_{sub.WIRE}(t)$ failing to reach the threshold value represented by $INOM$,

then if the count of the counter **192** is different from (e.g. higher than) zero, the count of the counter **192** is varied in a second direction, e.g. “down”, with the counter **192** decreasing at each clock pulse from the clock **216** of a constant value (fixed drop), that is by the fixed value set by the circuit block **198** until the count value of the counter **192** reaches zero. If the count of the counter **192** is (already) at zero the output from the counter **192** can be assumed to be NOP (No Operation). (102) Those of skill in the art will appreciate that “up” and “down” as exemplified herein for the opposite counting directions for the counter **192** do not represent per se a mandatory choice insofar as one or more embodiments may adopt, mutatis mutandis, a complementary choice.

(103) The latch circuit section **180** as shown in FIG. 5 includes a latch circuit **218** which can be reset via an input **220** (IN3) and which is sensitive via a comparison circuit block **222** (a “higher of equal” comparison circuit, for instance) to the output from the counter **192** in the circuit block **178** and to a limit value (for instance an upper or maximum counter value Counter_MAX) as provided by a circuit block **224**. The circuit block is in turn coupled to an input **226** (labelled IN2) configured to receive a (time) setting value TNOM from a setting block TS.

(104) The value for TNOM can thus be set (selectively, for instance) at a nominal value corresponding to a desired time for the latch circuit section **180** to latch when a certain constant current (K2.Math.I.sub.NOM, by way of non-limiting example) is sensed to flow through the wire W. The circuit **172** may thus be configured to operate as a sort of adjustable slow-blow/fast-blow fuse whose time of intervention can be selectively adjusted.

(105) It will be again appreciated that, as is the case for the circuit block IS for setting the nominal value INOM for the current, the setting block TS for TNOM, may be a distinct block from some of the embodiments. In some embodiments, the setting block IS will fix the value of Counter_MAX=TNOM*Clock frequency. This can be implemented with any of a variety of suitable circuitry (e.g., look-up table or SPI register or A/D, and so on . . .) in various embodiments.

(106) A latch circuit section **180** as exemplified herein will latch its output signal Out (at a node indicated as **228** in FIG. 5) to a certain logic value (“1” for instance) as result of the value of the counter **192** reaching a limit value (the upper value Counter_MAX set via the block **224**, for instance) determined as a function of the setting signal TNOM received at the input **226**.

(107) In one or more embodiments, the value for the limit value Counter_MAX (an upper or maximum value will be considered herein for simplicity) can be set based on the relationship Counter_MAX=TNOM*clock frequency, where clock frequency designates the frequency of the clock **216** which, while represented as included in the circuit block **178**, may be configured to clock operation of the whole circuit **172**.

(108) As indicated, the counter **192** may be scaled to 2.sup.I so that a time matrix can be found to correspond to the matrix for the “K” values in the comparator circuit section **174** so that T.sub.NOM*[∞, 2.sup.0, 2.sup.1, 2.sup.2 . . . , 2.sup.n-2], I.sub.NOM (K1, K2, K3, . . . , Kn), where T.sub.NOM*2.sup.(I-2) may be held to correspond to the time to latch when a constant current I.sub.NOM*KI is sensed to flow through the wire W.

(109) The notation above takes into account the shift in the K indexes, with K1 becoming K2 and so on. Also the nominal time is held to correspond to the first step. After the shift, the first step is K2 and the value 1=K1 is associated to T=∞.

(110) The elements in such a matrix can be regarded as defining a reaction time vs. current curve which can be approximated by N steps as discussed in the following in connection with FIG. 15.

(111) In some embodiments, when the electronic fuse **110** detects a current flowing in the wire or cable **102** that is above the first current threshold INOM (e.g., when I.sub.WIRE(t)/INOM>1) such that the counter **192** starts to count then the electronic fuse **110** may write a specific data (e.g., a single bit) in a register (e.g., within the registers **126**) to flag this event to the microcontroller **105**. If the counter reaches the limit value Counter_MAX causing the control of the power switch **156** in order to latch (that is interrupt or at least reduce) the current I_{cable} flowing in the cable, then the

electronic fuse **110** may write an additional specific data (e.g., a single bit) in a register to flag this event to the microcontroller **105**. When the electronic fuse **110** detects a current flowing in the cable **102** that is above hard-short latch-off threshold T_{hs} representing an upper limit of the current I_{cable} that the cable **102** can withstand and that should never be exceeded, then the electronic fuse **110** may write a further specific data (e.g., a single bit) in a register to flag this specific condition. All these data can be read by the microcontroller **105** through the communication interface **107** (e.g. SPI interface). In some embodiments, the microcontroller **105** can configure the circuit **172** by providing I_{NOM} , T_{NOM} and T_{hs} parameters by writing respective values in respective registers through the communication interface (e.g. SPI interface) such that the electronic fuse **110** can read and configure the circuit **172** accordingly.

(112) The diagrams of FIGS. **13A** and **13B** are exemplary of the possible behavior of a circuit as exemplified in FIG. **16** by assuming that the current flowing through the wire **W** increases ramp-like (triangular wave) as exemplified in the left-hand portion of FIG. **13A** by increasing from zero to the nominal value $I_{sub.NOM}$ and on through the various thresholds $I_{NOM}*[K1, K2, \dots]$ up to a limit value (peak level) at which the latch section **180** is activated in order to interrupt (or at least reduce) the current $I_{sub.WIRE}(t)$. This may occur via the intervention of a power switch as discussed in the following in connection with the FIG. **20**.

(113) The diagram of FIG. **13B** is exemplary of the corresponding time behavior of the count value **C** of the counter **192**, with the count value **C** increasing as the current $I_{sub.WIRE}(t)$ increases until the (upper) limit value $Counter_MAX = T_{NOM} * \text{clock frequency}$ is reached at which the latch circuit section **180** intervenes as indicated by **L** in FIG. **13B**.

(114) Operation of a circuit as exemplified in FIG. **16** in the case of a current $I_{sub.WIRE}(t)$ varying with continuity over time (sawtooth-like, for instance) involves operation cycles including: a NOP phase (for $I_{sub.WIRE}(t)$ lower than $I_{sub.NOM}$), a counter scaled increase phase **CI** (until intervention of the latch as indicated at **L**), and a counter decrease (fixed drop) phase indicated as **CD**.

(115) The diagrams of FIGS. **14A** and **14B** portray an exemplary corresponding behavior of a circuit as **172** in the case of a pulsed current $I_{sub.WIRE}(t)$ with a such pulsed current switching between a “zero” value (thus lower than $I_{sub.NOM}$) and an upper value lying somewhere in the matrix established by the values $K1, K2, \dots$. FIG. **14B** highlights that the counting phases of the counter **192** in opposite directions (e.g. “up” **CI** and “down” **CD**) may alternate and the latch circuit section **180** intervene at **L** as result of the count value of the counter **192** reaching the limit value $Counter_MAX$.

(116) The diagram of FIG. **15** is exemplary of the possibility of intervening on the “time axis”/“current axis” matrix namely $T_{sub.NOM} * [\infty, 2.sup.0, 2.sup.1, 2.sup.2 \dots, 2.sup.n-2]$, $I_{sub.NOM}(K1, K2, K3, \dots, K_n)$ in order to generate a notionally infinite number of current/time (**IT**) curves by setting the two parameters I_{NOM} (circuit block **IS** and input **182** in FIG. **5**) and T_{NOM} (input circuit block **TS** an input **190** in FIG. **5**).

(117) By acting on the value of the thresholds KI (which may be assumed to be identical for simplicity, but may even be selected to be different to pursue an even finer matching) such **IT** curves can be caused to fit with the characteristics of a certain wire **W** to be protected (e.g. a wiring harness). Such characteristics are currently found to exhibit a sort of hyperbole-like behavior (as exemplified in FIG. **16**), which lends itself to be fitted by a $\frac{1}{2}.sup.I(I=0, 1, 2, \dots)$ behavior of the relationship which may link I_{NOM} and T_{NOM} in a circuit such as the circuit **172** of FIG. **5**.

(118) The current and time values in the curve may define a current amplitude and a pulse duration which may lead the temperature of the wire to reach a specified limit (maximum) temperature. In that respect it will be appreciated that while a “wire” is referred to for the sake of simplicity throughout this description, the wire **W** can be regarded as exemplary of any electrical component configured to be traversed by a certain current ($I_{sub.WIRE}(t)$ being exemplary of such a current) and desired to be protected.

(119) For instance, as exemplified in FIG. 16, the IT response of a circuit as the circuit 172 can be fitted to a desired behavior by setting a value for INOM with reference to a highest (maximum) DC current rate. By way of example the diagram of FIG. 16 refers to three possibilities: 12A (dashed line), 18A (chain line), and 30A (double dotted chain line). These values may correspond, for instance, to wire section areas corresponding to 0.5 mm^{sup.2}, 1.0 mm^{sup.2} and 2.5 mm^{sup.2}. Of course, the values indicated are merely exemplary and non-limiting for the embodiments. For instance these IT curves may be rated at a maximum wire temperature of 150° C. (and an ambient temperature of 85° C. maximum) so that the value for INOM may be caused to correspond to a highest (acceptable) current root mean square (rms) value I_{sub}.RMS with all the IT values of the circuit 172 adapted to be automatically fitted to the wire IT curve and the time of intervention of the latch circuit section 180 correspondingly adjusted (by setting TNOM) to be gradually reduced as the value of the current decreases (from right to left in the diagram of FIG. 16) to increasingly higher values with respect to the “asymptotic” value possibly related to long times such as 300 s. Of course, the indicated figure of 300 s as the time corresponding to the first step is merely by way of example. That value can change in a manner coordinated with the constant value used for the fixed drop (count down) operation of the counter 192. For instance, 300 s may be a value fitting with a certain cable when the fixed drop is set, for instance to 16. If the value of fixed drop is changed, fitting will still be possible by fixing a different time value.

(120) FIG. 17 is exemplary of the same concept portrayed in the form of a graph where the time (ordinate scale) is portrayed as a function of current (abscissa scale). The continuous line C85 portrays the behavior of a wire W at an ambient temperature of 85° C. and the dashed line is exemplary of the behavior of the circuit 172 acting as a “smart” fuse and the chain line is exemplary of the application of a load pulse LP.

(121) The diagram of FIG. 17 refers, by way of example, to an “asymptotic” time of 300 s for INOM=12 A (wire size 0.5 mm^{sup.2} with maximum DC current 12 A) by assuming an initial current equal to zero. Stated otherwise, 300 s may correspond to the first step: INOM*K2 while when I_{sub}.WIRE<12 A.fwdarw.T=infinite; the asymptotic timing will thus change with the value of fixed drop changed. The diagrams of FIGS. 18A and 18B are further exemplary of the behavior of a circuit 172 as exemplified in FIG. 5. In a case where the current I_{sub}.WIRE(t) does not cause the count value of the counter 192 to reach an upper limit value Counter_MAX (FIG. 18A). In a case where the current I_{sub}.WIRE(t) does conversely cause the count value of the counter 192 to reach such a limit value thus causing the latch circuit section 180 to intervene to interrupt the current (FIG. 18B). In both FIGS. 18A and 18B the upper diagram is exemplary of a possible time behavior of the current I_{sub}.WIRE(t) which in FIG. 18A is held to remain at a “safe” value of, e.g. 11.9 A which is less than a limit of 12.0 A and in FIG. 18B is assumed to reach a value of 12.7 A in excess of the limit of 12 A. Correspondingly, the count value C of the counter 192 remains practically at 0 (and thus does not reach the limit value Counter_MAX in FIG. 18A) while in FIG. 18B the count value increases and reaches the limit value Counter_MAX to eventually decrease after the intervention of the latch. In FIG. 18A, the wire temperature (° C.) T is shown to remain at a value somewhere between 135° C. and 160° C. held to be acceptable, while in FIG. 18B the wire temperature is shown to rise to a higher level nearer to 160° C. and to drop subsequently as a result of the current being interrupted by the intervention of the latch circuit section. Once again the numerical values reported in the foregoing are merely exemplary and non-limiting.

(122) Designing a circuit 172 as exemplified in FIG. 5 may involve calculating the values for the thresholds K2 to Kn in the comparator circuit section 174 with the criterion of causing the rms value for the current I_{sub}.WIRE(t) to remain below a specified current value I_{sub}.NOM as set via the parameter INOM. In the case of a pulsed current (see, for instance, FIGS. 14A and 14B) the counting action of the counter 192 may be subjected to cumulative increase (see especially FIG. 3B) as a result of the counter 192 possibly starting to count from a non-zero value when the pulses have their rising edges. Such a cumulative effect may eventually cause the counter value to reach

the value Counter_MAX to produce undesired intervention of the latch. In one or more embodiments, a maximum value for the duty cycle of a pulsed current can be identified which represents a limit condition before a counter accumulation as exemplified in FIG. 14B sets in. In that way the possibility exists of facilitating scaled up, fixed drop-down operation of the counter 192 in such a way that the counter 192 starts counting (e.g. up) from zero at each rising edge of the pulsed current and returns to zero (e.g. due to fixed drop-down) just before a subsequent pulse.

(123) The diagram of FIG. 19 refers to the exemplary case of current pulses including square wave pulses with a period T given by the sum of an “on” time T1I and an “off” time T2I. The diagram of the FIG. 19 is exemplary of the possibility of defining a relationship linking the step counter value $I \cdot T1I$ (with Step Counter $I = 2 \cdot \sup(I - 2)$), the parameter INOM and the amplitude $INOM \cdot KI$ of the pulsed current such that the product Step counter $I \cdot T1 \cdot \text{clock frequency}$ over the on-time T1I (increase phase CI) is compensated by the product Fixed drop $\cdot T2I \cdot \text{clock frequency}$ over the off-time T2I (drop phase CD) with Fixed drop set by the block 188 in FIG. 5. Application of that criteria leads to setting KI (by assuming a uniform distribution within the matrix of the thresholds in the comparator circuit section 174) such that: $KI = 1 \cdot \text{MAX} \cdot \text{custom character} \cdot \text{custom character} \cdot \text{duty} \cdot \text{custom character} \cdot \text{custom character} \cdot \text{cycle} = 2 \cdot (I - 2) + \text{Fixed} \cdot \text{custom character} \cdot \text{custom character} \cdot \text{Drop} \cdot \text{Fixed} \cdot \text{custom character} \cdot \text{custom character} \cdot \text{Drop}$ with the values for KI independent from TNOM.

(124) FIG. 20 is exemplary of the possible use of a circuit 172 as exemplified in FIG. 5 within the framework of a system 263 which facilitates protection of a wiring harness W supplying a load L. As exemplified in FIG. 20, such a system may include a “smart” power switch and a power supply source (such as an Automotive Power Bus APB) coupled to the positive pole B+ of a battery B at a voltage VBAT.

(125) In one or more embodiments, a system 263 as exemplified in FIG. 20 may include a power switch PS such as, for instance, a power MOSFET transistor having the current path therethrough (source-drain in the case of a field-effect transistor such as a MOSFET transistor) coupling the power supply VBAT with the wiring harness W and the control terminal of the power transistors PS (gate, in the case of field-effect transistor such as a MOSFET transistor) driven via a (logic) circuitry 180 which is sensitive to a drive signal of the load L as received at a drive node indicated as Input as well the output signal Out at the node 192 of the latch section of the circuit 172.

(126) In FIG. 20 parts or elements like parts or elements already discussed in connection with the previous figures are indicated by like references: a detailed description of these parts or elements will not be repeated for brevity. The representation of FIG. 20 exemplifies that the control electrode (gate, for instance) of the power transistor PS may be controlled by the circuitry 180 via a control stage 266 coupled to a VDS clamp circuit block 268 which is in turn sensitive to the battery voltage VBAT with the ensuing possibility of disconnecting the wiring harness W in the presence of an over-voltage condition over the voltage VBAT. The representation of FIG. 20 also highlights the possibility for the circuitry 180 to be sensitive to the output of a silicon protection block 270 which is in turn sensitive via a current sense block 272 to the current through the power transistor PS (and thus through the wiring harness W). The same current can be sensed by the sensor S configured to be coupled to the input 182 (IN1) as exemplified in FIG. 5). The representation in FIG. 20 (which also refers to the possible presence of a charge pump 274) exemplifies that, in addition to being sent to the circuitry 180 to possibly reduce/interrupt the current through the wire W the output signal Out from the latch section 180 of the circuit 172 can be sent to an output pin Fuse_DIAG, which may be used for diagnostic purposes, e.g. by being set high when the fuse is in latch state. In FIG. 20, F_CTRL denotes a pin available for fuse control, which can be connected to the input node IN3 (node 220 FIG. 5) as a reset pin for the latch.

(127) In FIG. 20, a pin designated FTS is shown connecting a resistance R.sub.FTS to ground GND with the purpose of setting the value of TNOM, so that the TS block may contribute to calculating the value of the Counter_MAX value discussed previously as a function of R.sub.FTS.

In FIG. 20, a pin designated FCS is also shown which may be used to set the value of INOM (see the block IS in FIG. 5). For instance, in one or more embodiments, the block S may be implemented as a current generator that generates a current $K_S \cdot I_{\text{sub.WIRE}}(t)$ proportional to the current $I_{\text{sub.WIRE}}(t)$ in the wire W: this may occur, for instance, via a sensfet feature associated to the transistor PS. A resistance $R_{\text{sub.FCS}}$ between the pin FCS and ground may be used to set the value for INOM so that, for instance, the voltage at the input node 182 in FIG. 5 (that is, IN1) is equal to 1 when $I_{\text{sub.WIRE}}$ equals INOM.

(128) The representation of FIG. 20 also refers to the possible presence of further pins designated CS (a function that may be provided in “smart” power devices) and GND (the ground of the IC of the system 263). This representation is merely for the sake of completeness, insofar as neither of the pins are of relevance to the instant description. FIG. 20 is exemplary of one possible, non-limiting application of certain embodiments to a control circuit embedded in an otherwise conventional “smart” power IC. Reference to this possible application is merely exemplary of one of a variety of possible applications which may benefit from the capability of controlling the temperature-over-time budget of a conductor having a current flowing therethrough.

(129) A circuit 172 as exemplified herein may thus be included (embedded, for instance) is a system having a different configuration from the one exemplified in FIG. 20. For instance, a circuit 172 as exemplified herein may be embedded in a gate driver not including a power switch. Also, in one or more embodiments, the operating parameters can be set in a manner different from the manner presented herein by way of example. For instance, INOM and/or TNOM can be set via serial bus communication and/or as an alternative to the analog implementation exemplified in FIG. 20, the blocks IS, TS can be implemented as digital circuitry.

(130) Likewise, sensing the current $I_{\text{sub.wire}}(t)$ may be via a shunt amperometric arrangement. Analog-to-digital (A/D) conversion of the current $I_{\text{sub.wire}}(t)$ may be facilitate current management in a (wholly) digital manner. In various possible applications, a circuit 172 as exemplified herein may provide a simple circuit able to evaluate the $I_{\text{sub.RMS}}$ (root-mean-square value of the current) flowing in a cable. A circuit 172 as exemplified herein may be used either to interact with a driver to interrupt a current (when $I_{\text{sub.RMS}} > \text{INOM}$, for instance), to limit the current flowing in a wire by PWM modulation or just to issue a warning that may be communicated by a diagnostic. As noted, a circuit 172 as exemplified herein is able to measure the $I_{\text{sub.RMS}}$ value insofar as the parameters (thresholds) K_2 to K_n can be selected as normalized values of a current defined for normalized values of the timing (1 to $2^{\text{sup.n-2}}$). The values K_2 to K_n may be fixed values such that, if multiplied by INOM, may define an IT curve fitting with the wire IT characteristics where the wire IT characteristics are defined for a maximum temperature of the wires with a given ambient temperature, which is facilitated by the fact that K_2 to K_n can be calculated for a constant value of $I_{\text{sub.RMS}}$. One or more embodiments as exemplified herein facilitate the $I_{\text{sub.RMS}}$ calculation/evaluation by implementing the calculation of the integral of $i^{\text{sup.2}}(t)$ over time (that is $\int i^{\text{sup.2}}(t) dt$) as a simple counter where the incremental value dt is discrete and made variable as a function of the current. One or more embodiments take advantage of using power of 2 ($2^{\text{sup.I}}$) incremental values as this facilitates a simple implementation of the counter. Determining (calculating) the current thresholds as $\text{INOM} \cdot (K_1, \dots, K_n)$ facilitates obtaining a counting result which is representative of $I_{\text{sub.RMS}}$. One or more embodiments were found to operate correctly also when the current $i(t)$ is variable with fast transients insofar as a system clock frequency can be selected which is (much) higher (ten time higher, for instance) than the frequency bandwidth of $i(t)$. In that way, the incremental value ($2^{\text{sup.I}}$) is updated many times during a transient. This facilitates achieving a high degree of precision as a function of the resolution of the references $\text{INOM} \cdot (K_1, \dots, K_n)$.

(131) A circuit (for instance, 172) as exemplified herein may include an input node (for instance, 182) configured to receive a sensing signal (for instance, IN1) indicative of a current intensity (for instance, $I_{\text{sub.WIRE}}(t)$ of a current flowing in a conductor (for instance, W) and an output node

(for instance, **192**) configured to emit an output signal (for instance, Out). The circuit may include signal processing circuitry (for instance, **174** and **176** coupled to the input node to receive the sensing signal therefrom, the signal processing circuitry configured to compare (for instance, **184**, **190**) the current intensity with a reference value (for instance, INOM) for the current intensity in the conductor and to produce (for instance, **188**) a comparison signal (for instance, D1, . . . , Dn) indicative of whether the current intensity exceeds the reference value. The circuit may include counter circuitry (for instance, **192**) coupled to the signal processing circuitry, the counter circuitry driven by the comparison signal and configured to count in a first count direction (for instance, upward) as a result of the comparison signal indicating that the current intensity exceeds the reference value. The circuit may include latch circuitry (for instance, **180** coupled (for instance at **222**) to the counter circuitry, the latch circuitry sensitive to the count value of the counter circuitry and configured, as a result of the count value of the counter circuitry reaching a limit value (for instance, Counter_MAX), to emit the output signal at the output node.

(132) In some embodiments, the output node may be configured to emit a current control output signal (for instance, towards the logic circuitry **180**) to reduce (for instance, to interrupt) the current flowing in the conductor and/or a warning output signal (for instance, Fuse_DIAG) indicative of a current intensity value (for instance instantaneous, $I_{\text{sub.WIRE}}(t)$, or root-mean-square, $I_{\text{sub.RMS}}$) of the current flowing in the conductor having reached a limit value.

(133) In some embodiments, the counter circuitry may be configured to count in a second count direction (for instance, downward), opposite the first count direction, as result of the comparison signal indicating that the current intensity fails to reach the reference value. In some embodiments In some embodiments the first and second count directions of the counter circuitry may include increasing and decreasing, respectively, the count value of the counter circuitry, and/or the counter circuitry may be configured to omit counting in the second count direction, opposite the first count direction, in the presence of a zero count value of the counter circuitry.

(134) In some embodiments the circuit may include first parameter setting circuitry (for instance, IS) coupled to the first input node, the first parameter setting circuitry configured to set the reference value for the current intensity in the conductor. The first parameter setting circuitry may comprise a normalization block configured to supply the first input node with a sensing signal normalized to the reference value for the current intensity in the conductor.

(135) In some embodiments, the signal processing circuitry may include a comparator bank (for instance, **184**) coupled to the first input node and configured to compare the current intensity with a plurality of thresholds, wherein the comparison signal may comprise a multi-bit binary word, wherein the counter circuitry may be configured to vary its count in the first count direction as a function of the multi-bit binary word. In some embodiments, the counter circuit may be configured to vary its count in the second count direction in fixed variation steps (for instance, as set by **198**).

(136) In some embodiments, the latch circuitry may comprise second parameter setting circuitry (for instance, TS, **188**) configured to set the limit value (for instance, Counter_MAX) for the latch circuitry to emit the current control signal. In some embodiments, the second parameter setting circuitry may be configured to receive (for instance, **190**) a time setting signal (for instance, IN2, TNOM) which is a function of a latch time for the latch circuitry to emit the current control signal for a certain constant current intensity in the conductor and to set the limit value for the latch circuitry to emit the current control signal as a function of the time setting signal.

(137) In some embodiments, the thresholds in the plurality of thresholds (for instance, K1, . . . Kn) in the comparator bank have values wherein the time setting signal multiplied by $2^{\text{sup.}(I-2)}$ equals a latch time for the latch circuitry to emit the current control signal for a constant current intensity in the conductor equal to the product of the reference value and the I-th threshold in the plurality of thresholds in the comparator bank.

(138) A system (for instance, **263**) as exemplified herein for supplying electrical power to a load (for instance, L) via a conductor may include an electronic switch (for instance, PS) having a

control terminal as well as a current path therethrough, the electronic switch configured to be arranged with the current path therethrough between an electrical power supply source (for instance, APB) and the conductor to control current flow between the electrical power supply source and the conductor. The system may include a circuit (for instance, **172**) as exemplified herein having the input node configured to receive a sensing signal indicative of a current intensity of a current flowing in the conductor and the output node coupled (for instance, via the logic circuit **180**) to the control terminal of the electronic switch and configured to apply thereto the current control signal to reduce (for instance, to interrupt) the current flowing in the conductor.

(139) In some embodiments, a method of operating a circuit or a system may include selecting an upper limit for a DC current intensity in the conductor and adopting the upper limit for DC current intensity in the conductor as the reference value for the current intensity in the conductor.

(140) FIG. **6** is a schematic diagram illustrating further details of the low current bypass subsystem **118**, in accordance with some embodiments. As shown in FIG. **6**, the low current bypass subsystem **118** includes an internal path that may be used to supply the load **106** when it beneficial or otherwise may advantageously be provided with low current even if the external power MOSFET **M0** is turned off.

(141) The low current bypass subsystem **118** includes a low current bypass transistor **M1** which is selectively enabled from the digital part (e.g., from the logic **122**, and in some embodiments, from the p-channel bypass circuitry **130** within the logic **122**). For example, in some embodiments, the p-channel bypass circuitry **130** in the logic **122** may transmit a control signal to the **M1** gate driver circuitry, which causes the **M1** gate driver circuitry **230** to selectively enable the low current bypass transistor **M1** via a control signal delivered to a gate terminal of the bypass transistor **M1**.

(142) Once **M1** is activated (e.g., placed in a conductive state) the microcontroller **105** could decide in which state the device (e.g., the electronic fuse **110** or system **100**) should stay maintaining the bypass activated. In some embodiments, the device is operable in a low consumption mode, and in this condition or mode the current consumption of the device is minimized or reduced, all the features and diagnostics are disabled, and the device is just feeding the load with current via the low current bypass and sensing its drain-source voltage (e.g., sensing the drain-source voltage across the low current bypass transistor **M1**).

(143) In some embodiments, the microcontroller **105** could maintain the device in an active state even when the low current bypass transistor **M1** is enabled, in which case the current consumption from the battery is higher than the previous state (e.g., higher than the low consumption mode), but all device features (e.g., the features and functionalities of the system **100** and the electronic fuse **110** described herein) are active.

(144) An advantage of the active state during the condition when low current bypass is activated is that when the external power MOSFET **M0** is automatically turned on the charge pump **109** is already ready to switch on the external power MOSFET **M0**. On the other hand, in the low consumption mode, before the external power MOSFET **M0** can be switched on the device may experience some delay or wait a certain amount of time before certain features like the charge pump **109** can be turned on and capable of switching on the external power MOSFET **M0**. The system **100** also includes a power management module **111**.

(145) The low current bypass subsystem **118** includes V_{ds} sensing circuitry **232** configured to continuously sense the voltage drop across the low current bypass transistor **M1**, and when the load **106** is trying to sink current (e.g., when the load becomes operational or otherwise is turned on), the current initially flows through the low current bypass transistor **M1**, and consequently the voltage drop V_{ds} of the low current bypass transistor **M1** starts to increase. The sensed voltage drop V_{ds} may be compared with a reference threshold V_{ref} , for example, by a comparator **234**. When the sensed voltage drop V_{ds} is greater than the reference threshold V_{ref} , the low current bypass subsystem **118** provides an output signal (e.g., via an output of the comparator **234**) to the digital core or logic **122**, which causes the logic **122** to switch on the external power MOSFET **M0**

(e.g., via a control signal output by the gate driver **116**), and to switch off the low current bypass transistor **M1** (e.g., via a control signal output by the **M1** gate driver **230**), and in a case where the electronic fuse **110** is in low consumption mode, it goes in active mode autonomously or automatically. This latter event causes also the electronic fuse to write a specific data (e.g., a single bit) in a specific register location (e.g., within the registers **126**) such that the microcontroller **105** can read it and become aware of this specific event, in some embodiments.

(146) FIG. 7 illustrates further details of the V_{ds} sensing circuitry **232**, in accordance with some embodiments. As shown in FIG. 7, the low current bypass functionality is activated by a voltage drop across resistor **R1**. The voltage drop across resistor **R1** is generated through the switching on of transistor **M2**, which allows the current **I1** to flow through resistor **R1**, thereby creating the voltage drop across resistor **R1**. The voltage drop across **R1** may be designed to generate the appropriate V_{gs} to switch on the low current bypass transistor **M1**.

(147) When the load **106** is trying to sink current, the current initially is flowing through the low current bypass transistor **M1**, and consequently the V_{ds} of the low current bypass transistor **M1** starts to increase carrying down the gate of transistor **M3**. As soon as the V_{gs} of transistor **M3** is greater than the threshold voltage V_{th} of transistor **M3**, the transistor **M3** allows to the current to flow through it, moreover the current will follow the equation $IR3=(V_{DSM1}-V_{GSM3})/R3=IR2$. The current creates a voltage drop across resistor **R2** which is compared with a threshold or reference voltage V_{ref} (e.g., by the comparator **234**), and the equation of V_{R2} is $V_{R2}=(R2/R3)*(V_{DSM1}-V_{GSM3})$. As soon as the voltage across **R2** becomes greater than V_{ref} , the logic **122** that receives that information from the low current bypass subsystem **118** (e.g., from an output of the comparator **234**) will trigger the device to wake up and automatically switch on the external power MOSFET **M0** in order to feed the current needed or desired to power the load and to switch off the low current bypass transistor **M1**.

(148) FIG. 8 is a schematic diagram illustrating further details of the external MOSFET desaturation sensing subsystem **120**. In particular, the desaturation sensing subsystem **120** monitors the external MOSFET **M0** drain-source voltage in order to avoid an exit from the ohmic MOSFET region and entrance into the saturation region, because in the saturation region a V_{ds} increase causes an increase of the power dissipated by the external MOSFET **M0** that in turn may generate overheating of the same. For this reason, the V_{ds} voltage of the external MOSFET **M0** is continuously monitored by the V_{ds} monitoring circuitry **236** when the external MOSFET **M0** is turned on. The V_{ds} monitoring circuitry **236** senses the floating voltage V_{ds} and transforms it to a voltage $V_{sub.0}$ referenced to ground. $V_{sub.0}$ is then converted to digital data by an ADC **238** and the output of the ADC **238** is compared with a selectable threshold (e.g., by the digital comparator, which in some embodiments may be included within the logic **122**, such as within the desaturation sensing circuitry **132** within the logic **122**). In some embodiments, the selectable threshold may be written by the microcontroller **105** into a specific register (e.g., within the registers **126**). In the event that $V_{sub.0}$ (the corresponding digital converted value) is above the selectable threshold, the external MOSFET **M0** is switched off. In some embodiments, this event (i.e., switching off the external MOSFET **M0** in response to $V_{sub.0}$ exceeding the selectable threshold) also causes the electronic fuse **110** to write a specific data (e.g., a single bit) in a specific register location such that the microcontroller **105** can read it and become aware of this specific event (i.e., V_{ds} overcoming the selected threshold value). In other words, a desaturation shut-down of the external MOSFET occurs when the V_{ds} exceeds the selectable threshold. In this case, both the external MOSFET **M0** and the bypass switch (e.g., the low current bypass transistor **M1**) may be turned off. For example, the external MOSFET **M0** may be turned off by an output of the digital comparator in the logic **122** which is transmitted to the gate driver **116**, which in turn outputs a control signal to switch off the external MOSFET **M0**. The low current bypass transistor **M1** may be switched off by a control signal issued by the logic **122** which causes the **M1** gate driver **230** to control the low current bypass transistor **M1** to switch off.

(149) Moreover, the V_{sub.0} voltage digital converted value may be stored in a status register and can be read by the microcontroller **105** via the communication interface **107** (e.g. an SPI interface).

(150) As shown in FIG. **8**, the V_{ds} monitoring circuitry **236** senses the floating voltage drop V_{ds} across the drain and source terminals of the external MOSFET **M0** and convert it to a corresponding voltage V_{sub.0} referenced to ground. The operational amplifier **244** is configured to cause the voltage drop V_{ds} to be “copied” as a same voltage drop across the terminals of the internal resistor **Ri1**. The current flowing in **Ri1** is $I_{sense} = V_{ds}/R_{i1}$. The current flowing across the external MOSFET is V_{ds}/R_{dsON} , and to minimize the impact of the measurement on the V_{ds} value the circuitry may be designed such that the condition $R_{i1} \gg R_{on}$ is met (e.g., with **Ri1** is 10×, 100×, and in some embodiments 1000× greater than R_{on}). The voltage drop **VO** across the resistor **Ri2** is $10 \cdot V_{ds}$ (the gain factor 10 is just an example) and is periodically sampled and digitized according to a given sampling frequency by the ADC **238** which generates a stream of digital samples representing **VO** that are passed to the logic **122**. In the event that the sampled digital signal representing **VO** is above the selectable threshold, the logic **122** (e.g., the desaturation sensing circuitry **132**) commands or otherwise controls the external MOSFET to switch off.

(151) In some embodiments, the desaturation sensing subsystem **120** which performs the V_{ds} sensing may be equipped with a dedicated self-test functionality in order to periodically check the status of the V_{ds} monitoring.

(152) FIG. **9** is a schematic diagram illustrating the desaturation sensing subsystem **120** and corresponding desaturation sensing circuitry **132** in the logic **122** including self-test features, in accordance with some embodiments. FIG. **10** is a schematic diagram illustrating further details of the self-test features shown in FIG. **9**, in accordance with some embodiments.

(153) As shown in FIG. **9**, the desaturation sensing subsystem **120** may including V_{ds} sensing circuitry and an ADC **238**, which may be the same or substantially the same as the V_{ds} monitoring circuitry **236** previously described herein with respect to FIG. **8**. However, as shown in FIG. **9**, in some embodiments, the desaturation sensing subsystem **120** may further include self-test circuitry **240** (which in some embodiments may be the same as the self-test circuitry **119** shown in FIG. **1**) and corresponding V_{ds} self-test circuitry **242** within the logic **122**. In some embodiments, the V_{ds} self-test circuitry **242** may be included as part of the self-test circuitry **128** shown in FIG. **1**.

(154) As shown in FIG. **10**, the V_{ds} monitoring circuitry implements a current generator via the elements **R3**, **M2**, **246**, and **Vbg**, which creates a current $I_{sub.R3}$ through resistor **R3** that is equal to $V_{sub.bg}/R3$. As such, considering $2 \cdot R_{sub.offset} \gg R2$ and thus the current flowing through **R.sub.offset** is negligible versus the current on **R2**, the point or node “A” has an offset voltage with respect to the OUT pin of $I_{sub.R3} \cdot R2 = V_{sub.OFF}$. The voltage drop $V_{sub.Roff}$ across the upper resistor **R.sub.offset** (e.g., between the terminal **SENSE_N** and the non-inverting (+) terminal of **244** (or node “B”)) can be determined as follows $V_{sub.DS} + V_{sub.OFF} = 2 \cdot V_{sub.Roff} \Rightarrow V_{sub.Roff} = (V_{sub.DS} + V_{sub.OFF})/2$.

(155) The operational amplifier **244** in operation “copies” the voltage at node B to node C and thus the voltage drop across the resistor **R** is forced to the value of the voltage drop across the upper resistor **R.sub.offset**. As a consequence, a current $V_{sub.Roff}/R_{i1}$ flows through **Ri1** and in turn through **M1** and **Ri2** causing a voltage drop on the resistor **Ri2** that is (by way of example) 10 times the voltage drop across **Ri1**, so (by way of example) equal to $10V_{Roff}$.

(156) The voltage drop across the resistor **Ri2** is then converted to a digital value by the ADC **238**. The output of ADC is digitally compared with a selectable threshold by a digital comparator (e.g., which may be included within the desaturation sensing circuitry **132** of the logic **122**), and if the output is greater than the selectable threshold this means that the V_{DS} of the external power MOSFET **M0** is too high. Thus, in order to avoid maintaining the external power MOSFET **M0** in the saturation region it is switched off, for example, by controlling the gate driver **116** to switch off the external power MOSFET **M0**.

(157) As it can be noticed in the previous equations the value $V_{sub.OFF}/2$ offset voltage (the

voltage drop across R2 divided by 2) created for the purpose of the self-test functionality may cause an undesired bias on the voltage drop value across the Ri2 resistor that is indicative of the Vds value. To avoid or mitigate this problem in normal mode operation (in other words when the device is not in the self-test mode) the V.sub.OFF offset voltage may be cancelled or removed from the voltage, and this is done in some embodiments through a calibration phase of the ADC **238** (e.g., a SAR converter) for example during the testing during manufacturing phase.

(158) The self-test circuitry **240** includes a test resistor R.sub.test that during the self-test mode is connected in parallel to the resistor R3 by closing the switch SW.sub.1, while during the normal operation mode is disconnected by opening the switch SW.sub.1. In the self-test mode when the switch SW.sub.1 is closed the equivalent resistance $R3 \parallel R_{\text{sub.test}}$ is lower than the resistance of resistor R3 when in normal operation mode, in this way increasing the intensity of the current I.sub.R3 flowing through resistor R3 with respect to the intensity level when in normal operation mode. Consequently, the voltage V.sub.OFF (voltage drop across R2) increases in self-test mode with respect to the level when in normal operation mode. Since the increased V.sub.OFF is well-known, the digital comparator of self-test circuitry **128** checks if the V.sub.DS measured before the self-test is increased of the added V.sub.OFF.

(159) Those skilled in the art will readily appreciate that the above mentioned Vds monitoring self-test mode does not imply that the whole application needs to be in a mode that precludes the external power MOSFET M0 being in an operative mode condition meaning switched on and supplying current to a load. In fact, in some embodiments, the above-described Vds monitoring self-test mode is fully operational and works in particular when the external power MOSFET M0 is switched on as in normal operating condition.

(160) In some embodiments, the microcontroller **105** is configured to write a data in a specific register (e.g., 1 bit) to command the electronic fuse **110** to perform the Vds sense self-test. The result of the Vds sense self-test may be stored in a dedicated status register (e.g., within the registers **126**) that can be read by the microcontroller **105** through the communication interface **107**.

(161) FIG. **11** is a schematic diagram illustrating further details of the external MOSFET over-temperature shutdown features of the system **100**, in accordance with one or more embodiments. As shown in FIG. **11**, the external power MOSFET M0 temperature is monitored through a temperature sensitive resistor or thermistor (which in some embodiments may be NTC (Negative Temperature Coefficient) thermistor), represented as R.sub.NTC with one terminal connected to the drain of the external power MOSFET M0. The direct connection of the NTC thermistor to the drain of the external power MOSFET M0 allows an optimal heat exchange between them, thereby facilitating a faster response of thermistor to temperature variation of the external power MOSFET M0 with respect to the usual case where an NTC thermistor is biased to a lower voltage than the drain of the external power MOSFET M0 and so an electrical isolation would otherwise be needed or desired between them.

(162) This direct connection is allowed at least in part due to the NTC level shifter circuitry **250**, which may be included within or as part of the external MOS temperature sensing subsystem **114**. In particular, the NTC level shifter circuitry **250** creates a biasing voltage NTC_M which is equal to the voltage at the external MOSFET M0 drain V.sub.DRAIN_MOS minus an internal voltage reference V.sub.ref, so $V_{\text{sub.NTC_M}} = V_{\text{sub.DRAIN_MOS}} - V_{\text{sub.ref}}$.

(163) The NTC thermistor and R.sub.bias (shown in FIGS. **11** and **12** as R.sub.D) are configured as a resistor ladder between the external MOSFET drain and NTC_M, thus the voltage V.sub.NTC of the central point of the resistor ladder (NTC terminal) with respect to the voltage of the drain of the external MOSFET M0 will follow the equation:

$$V_{\text{sub.NTC}} = (V_{\text{sub.DRAIN_FET}} - V_{\text{sub.NTC_M}}) * (R_{\text{sub.NTC}} / (R_{\text{sub.NTC}} + R_{\text{sub.BIAS}})),$$

where

$$V_{\text{sub.ref}} = (V_{\text{sub.DRAIN_FET}} - V_{\text{sub.NTC_M}})$$

(164) The external MOS temperature sensing subsystem **114** includes temperature sensitive resistor circuitry **252** (which may be referred to herein as NTC resistor sense circuitry **252**) that senses and transfers the differential voltage across the temperature sensitive resistor (e.g., a NTC resistor) to a voltage referenced to ground $V_{sub.0}$, which is digitally converted through an ADC **254**.

(165) The converted voltage is compared with a selectable threshold inside the NTC logic core (e.g., within the temperature monitoring circuitry **134** within the logic **122**), and if the voltage exceeds the threshold, the external power MOSFET **M0** is automatically switched off (e.g., through control of the gate driver **116**).

(166) In some embodiments, the switch-off of the external power MOSFET **M0** is actuated autonomously by the electronic fuse **110** without instruction or intervention by the microcontroller **105**, thus reducing the reaction time and increasing the level of safety provided by the electronic fuse **110**.

(167) In the event that the converted voltage exceeds the selectable threshold and the external power MOSFET **M0** is automatically switched off, in some embodiments, the electronic fuse **110** writes a specific data (e.g., 1 bit) into a specific memory location (e.g., within the computer-readable memory or the registers **126**) to record that an external power MOSFET over-temperature condition has occurred, which the microcontroller **105** can read and become aware of this specific condition. The electronic fuse **110** writes an additional specific data (e.g., 1 bit) into an additional specific memory location (e.g., within the computer-readable memory or the registers **126**) to record that the external power MOSFET **M0** has been shut-down or switched off, which the microcontroller **105** can read and become aware of this specific event.

(168) The selected threshold to adopt (e.g., the threshold that is selected, which in some embodiments may be selected from among a plurality of possible thresholds) may be communicated by the microcontroller **105** to the electronic fuse **110** (e.g., to the logic **122**) by writing the corresponding value (e.g., a threshold voltage value or the like) in a specific register (e.g., within the registers **126**). In some embodiments, the converted voltage $V_{sub.0}$ is also stored in a status register which may be readable by the microcontroller **105**, e.g., through the communication interface **107** (e.g., SPI).

(169) FIG. **12** is a schematic diagram illustrating further details of the NTC resistor sense circuitry **252**, the NTC level shifter circuitry **250**, and the temperature monitoring circuitry **134**, in accordance with one or more embodiments.

(170) As shown in FIG. **12**, the biasing voltage NTC_M is generated through NTC level shifter circuitry **250** with a current generator (e.g., including $V_{sub.BG}$, operational amplifier **260**, “lower” R resistor connected to the ground) equal to $V_{sub.BG}/R$ which is sinked from $V_{sub.SENSE_N}$ through another resistor (“upper”) R whose terminals are connected to $SENSE_N$ and node C , and equal to the one used for the current generator. Thus, the voltage drop across the upper resistor R is equal to $V_{sub.BG}$ and so the voltage at node C is $V_{sub.C}=V_{sub.SENSE_N}-V_{sub.BG}$. Finally, it is buffered (e.g., by operational amplifier **262** and MOS **M1**) to node NTC_M in order to be used as the biasing voltage for the thermal sensor ($R_{sub.NTC}$).

(171) The NTC resistor $R_{sub.NTC}$ voltage sensing can be implemented, in at least some embodiments, with an operational amplifier **258** which transfers the voltage $V_{sub.NTC}$ on node A creating a drop across resistor $R1$ equal to the drop across $R_{sub.NTC}$.

(172) The current generated from the drop across resistor $R_{sub.1}$ equal to $I_{R.sub.1}=V_{sub.RTC}/R_{sub.1}$ will flow over a resistor which is (by way of example) 10 times $R_{sub.1}$, thereby gaining or increasing the voltage across $R_{sub.1}$, e.g., by a factor of 10. Accordingly, this block or circuitry senses the drop on the NTC resistor and transfers it to a voltage referenced to ground.

(173) The voltage gained is digitally converted by the ADC **254** and read from a digital comparator (e.g., within the temperature monitoring circuitry **134**) which compares it with a selectable threshold in order to switch off the external power MOSFET **M0** in case of the NTC voltage

exceeds the preset or selected threshold. It will be readily appreciated that the thermal sensor NTC is just an example of a thermal sensor which may be implemented in accordance with some embodiments; however, embodiments are not limited thereto. Any other suitable thermal sensors may be utilized in various embodiments, including, for example, a PTC (Positive Temperature Sensor) and even a diode can be used in combination with the described solution.

(174) As described herein, the present application provides electronic fuse devices and systems having a variety of advantageous features and functionalities. One such feature may include the capability of the electronic fuse **110** of emulating the so called I²t characteristic curve of a cable, acting in this way as an “electronic fuse.”

(175) Another feature of some embodiments includes the particular electrical connection of the temperature sensitive resistor (e.g., R.sub.NTC) to the external network (e.g., to the electrical network including the power supply **108** and the load **106**), as well as the particular circuitry to manage the temperature sensitive resistor R.sub.NTC sensing (e.g., the circuitry of the external MOS temperature sensing subsystem **114**). It will be readily appreciated that in some embodiments, the temperature sensitive resistor may be a NTC thermistor, but embodiments are not limited thereto. For example, in some embodiments, the temperature sensitive resistor may be a positive temperature coefficient (PTC) thermistor, a diode, or any other circuitry or circuit element suitable to sense temperature.

(176) In some embodiments, one of the two terminals of the temperature sensitive resistor R.sub.NTC is electrically connected to the drain of the external power MOSFET **M0** which is at “high voltage” connected to the power supply **108** (such as, for example, a car battery that can be 12 V, 24 V, 48 V, in some embodiments). This ensures an optimal heat exchange and facilitates protection of the temperature sensitive resistor in embodiments of the present disclosure. In contrast, circuits in which the same terminal of a temperature sensitive resistor is connected to a low voltage supply (e.g., 5 V) for compatibility with the low voltage used in the internal device may have a large voltage gap existing between the external power MOSFET (e.g., 48 V) and the voltage supply which the temperature sensitive resistor is connected to (e.g., 5 V), which may cause damage to the temperature sensitive resistor in such circuits.

(177) In some embodiments, the external power MOSFET switch-off may be performed autonomously by the electronic fuse **110** without the intervention of the outside microcontroller when the external power MOSFET reaches an over-temperature condition, and the over-temperature condition may be detected by the electronic fuse when the voltage across the terminal of the temperature sensitive resistor R.sub.NTC excess a threshold voltage.

(178) Another feature of some embodiments includes the presence of a combination of a communication interface (e.g., the communication interface **107**) and a set of registers (e.g., the registers **126**) that ensures a high level of configurability of the device (e.g., the electronic fuse **110**) and a sophisticated capability of monitoring the same from a system integrator perspective. The inclusion of these two technical features in the electronic fuse, in some embodiments, allows the microcontroller **105** to configure the electronic fuse **110** in a variety of ways according to different parameters whose values can be set or selectively programmed, e.g., by the microcontroller **105** writing the values as data in respective register memory locations (e.g., within the registers **126**). Moreover, the electronic fuse **110** may communicate to the microcontroller **105** (e.g., via the communication interface **107**) a variety of status/conditions related to the electronic fuse **110** and/or to the external power MOSFET, or physical parameter values that the electronic fuse **110** may measure by writing all the data representing that information in respective registers memory location such that the microcontroller **105** can read and so acquire them for monitoring purpose and subsequent decision making process and/or actuation.

(179) Yet another feature of some embodiments includes the low current bypass path, which in some embodiments may be an alternative current path (internal through the electronic fuse **110**) that includes an internal “small” MOS (e.g., the low current bypass transistor **M1**) to provide a

current to the load when the load calls for or otherwise utilizes a very low level of current. In this condition, the main external power MOSFET is switched off. The activation of the low current bypass circuitry is advantageous in terms of overall power consumption (i.e., reduces power consumption) as compared to the situation where the external power MOSFET (as well as the additional circuitry to drive the external power MOSFET) are utilized to supply the same low current.

(180) In some embodiments, the electronic fuse **110** may be switched to the active mode (from the Stand-by On mode) and the external power MOSFET may be switched on autonomously by the electronic fuse **110** itself without the intervention of the outside microcontroller in the event that the load starts to sink a high level of current that cannot or otherwise is desired not to be provided by the small internal MOS, this event being captured by the electronic fuse **110** detecting that the voltage across the drain and source terminals of the internal “small” MOS **M1** exceeds a threshold.

(181) Another feature of some embodiments includes the desaturation shut-down of the external MOSFET, e.g., by the external MOSFET desaturation sensing subsystem **120** as previously described herein.

(182) Further features include the self-testing circuitry, such as the self-test circuitry **113** of the current sensing subsystem **112** and the self-test circuitry **240** of the desaturation sensing subsystem **120** as described herein.

(183) Moreover, embodiments of the present disclosure may include the hard-short latch-off circuitry **170**, which may be included in the overcurrent protection I2t subsystem **152**. In case the sensed value of the current I_{cable} exceeds a threshold value T_{hs} , this event immediately triggers the command to the gate driver to turn off the external power MOSFET, causing the interruption of the current flow.

(184) FIGS. **21-24** and the corresponding description illustrate components, circuits, systems, and processes that may be incorporated within or utilized by the low current bypass subsystem **118**, in some embodiments.

(185) FIG. **22** is a functional block diagram, in accordance with some embodiments. The functional block diagram of FIG. **21** is generally illustrative of a system **280** which employs an “intelligent” current absorption management circuit **281**. The current absorption management system may correspond to an eFuse. A system **280** as illustrated in FIG. **21** is configured to controllably supply to an electrical load **L** energy drawn from a supply source **SS**. In the (purely illustrative) representation of FIG. **21**, the supply source **SS** is provided by a battery as may be the case of a system **280** equipping a vehicle **V**. It will be appreciated that both the source **SS** and the load **L** may be distinct elements from the embodiments, and the system **280** may be utilized to be coupled to the supply source **SS** (at a node **VBAT+**) and to the load **L** (at a node **OUT**) only when the system is installed and configured for operation.

(186) As illustrated in FIG. **21**, electrical supply of the load **L** is controlled via a (power) **283**. A power MOS transistor (power MOSFET) may be exemplary of such a switch, such a device being capable of conducting a relatively high current between source and drain. For simplicity and ease of explanation, the **283** is represented in FIG. **21** as an integral part of the system **280**. The **283** may however be a distinct element from the embodiments.

(187) As otherwise conventional in the art, a system **280** as illustrated in the functional block diagram of FIG. **21** may include a wide palette of functionalities. As illustrated in FIG. **21**, these functionalities may be arranged in: a first section I, which includes system and safety-related functions co-operating with an I/O interface (on the left-hand side of FIG. **21**) such as, for instance, parameter setting (Set) **282**, self-test (ST) **284**, diagnostic (Diag) **286**, control (C) **288**, watchdog (WD) **290** and limp-home (LH) **292** functionalities; a second section II, which includes power MOSFET protections such as, for instance, back electro-motive force (BEMF) clamping (Clamp) **294** and thermal protection (Therm) **296** functionalities; and a third section III, which includes power MOSFET gate driver and sensor functionalities such as, for instance, output voltage sensing

(Sense1) **298**, charge pump (CP) **300**, junction temperature sensing (Temp) **311**, supply voltage (VBAT+) sensing (Sense2) **312** and current sensing (Sense3) **314** functionalities.

(188) Embodiments as exemplified herein are primarily concerned with possible interplay of the functionality **281** with the other functionalities in the architecture, for instance with the power **283** and the current sensing functionality **314**. This may occur, for instance, via standby monitoring (SBmont) and standby switch (SBsw) functionalities as generally represented by blocks **316** and **318** in FIG. **21** and suited to be implemented as exemplified in FIGS. **2** and **3**. For that reason, various possible implementation options of the functional architecture of FIG. **21** will now be discussed by placing emphasis on co-operation of the functionality **281** with the other functionalities in the architecture with the power **283**. To that effect, the power **283** is shown having a current path therethrough (source-drain in the case of a field-effect transistor such as a MOSFET transistor) coupled between the supply source SS (at a node VBAT+) and the load L (at a node OUT). As noted, the load L can be notionally any kind of electrical load; the embodiments are thus largely “transparent” to the nature and characteristics of the load L.

(189) By way of general reference, two types of implementation options will be discussed in connection with FIGS. **22** to **24** as exemplary of possible variants where: the power **283** may be external to (and thus distinct from) the circuit **281**, in contrast to the representation of FIG. **21**, where the **283** is included in the circuit **281**, and/or the circuit **281** can switch to a low-current consumption state (ON standby state) where a small current is delivered to the load, either in response to a command from an external controller (a microcontroller or μ C, for instance, as discussed in connection with FIG. **22**) or as a result of automatic enablement of that state in the absence of an external command (as discussed in connection with FIG. **24**). As noted, for the sake of simplicity and ease of explanation, unless indicated otherwise, throughout the figures like parts or elements are indicated with like reference symbols and a corresponding description will not be repeated for each and every figure for brevity.

(190) Also, features and details discussed in connection with one implementation option can be applied, singly or in combination, in another implementation option. That is, a feature or detail being here illustrated, singly or in combination, within the framework of one implementation option shall not be construed as an indication that such a feature or detail can be used exclusively in the implementation option where the features or detail is illustrated herein.

(191) In FIG. **22**, a current absorption management circuit **281** is illustrated coupled to a supply source SS (at a node VBAT+) and to a load L (at a node OUT) in order to control current supply to the load L via a power **283**. The current path through the power **283** (source-drain in the case of a field-effect transistor such as a MOSFET transistor) is thus coupled between the supply source SS and the load L, so that load energization, that is current flow through the load, is: facilitated (permitted) in response to the **283** being turned ON, namely made conductive, and countered (prevented) in response to the **283** being turned OFF, namely made nonconductive.

(192) The power **283** can be alternatively switched on (that is, made conductive) and off (that is, made non-conductive) via a drive signal produced by a driver **320** and applied via a node GD to the control node (gate, in the case of a field-effect transistor such as a MOSFET transistor) of the power **283**. Reference **322** indicates a voltage regulator coupled to the supply source SS and configured (in a manner known per se to those of skill in the art) to provide a regulated supply voltage Vreg_out to the other parts of the device **280** as illustrated in the functional block diagram of FIG. **21**. As discussed in the following, the voltage regulator may comprise a high-power section **322A** (LDO, for instance) and a low-power section **322B** (a no-cap pre-regulator, for instance). Reference **324** denotes as a whole a part (subsystem) of the circuit **281** devoted to managing a standby state of the circuit **281** as discussed in the following. This may occur in response to a standby signal received at an input node OSS from a controller MC (a microcontroller or μ C, for instance). As illustrated, the controller MC may be an external controller, distinct from the circuit **281**.

(193) As illustrated in FIG. 22, the subsystem **324** comprises active standby logic circuitry **326** sensitive to a signal received at the node OSS from the controller MC as well as to a wake-up signal bypass_vds_sat from a comparator **328** which compares with a reference (voltage) threshold Vref_1 a signal which indicates the intensity of the current flowing into the load L at the node OUT and which, as discussed in the following, can be used to facilitate (quick) re-activation of the main **283** to a conductive state. Such a re-activation signal may be obtained (in a manner known per se to those of skill in the art) via a current sensing functionality such as **314** in FIG. 21.

(194) As illustrated herein, such a re-activation signal may be simply obtained as a result of a feedback action based on the value of the voltage at the node OUT compared in a comparator **328** with a (possibly adjustable) threshold Vref_1 referred to the supply voltage VBAT+. The voltage at the node OUT (and thus the voltage drop between the voltage at the node VBAT+ and the voltage at the node OUT) can be reasonably assumed to be a function of the output current. In fact, an electronic switch in a conductive state can be regarded as a resistor having a resistance value, such as RDSon in the case of a field-effect transistor such as a MOSFET transistor. Consequently, a signal adapted to be supplied to the comparator **328** for comparison with the threshold Vref_1 can be simply obtained by monitoring the voltage at the node OUT.

(195) In one or more embodiments, a secondary bypass **283A** such as a (low-power) MOSFET transistor (p-channel for instance) may be coupled across the nodes VBAT+ and OUT thus having the current path therethrough (source-drain in the case of a field-effect transistor such as a MOSFET transistor) coupled between the supply source SS and the load L. The **283A** device being capable of conducting a relatively low current between source and drain (i.e., substantially lower than the high current capability of the power **283**). Stated otherwise, the re-activation signal may be simply obtained as a result of a feedback action based on the value of the voltage at the node OUT, that is by monitoring the (source-drain) voltage drop across the secondary bypass **283A**.

(196) As illustrated in FIG. 22 the logic circuitry **326** is configured to produce: a first signal Switch_GD-on/off which is applied (via the driver circuit **320**) to the control node (gate, in the case of a field-effect transistor such as a MOSFET transistor) of the power **283** to turn it alternatively on (conductive) and off (non-conductive), a second signal Switch_BS-on/off which is applied to the control node (gate, in the case of a field-effect transistor such as a MOSFET transistor) of the secondary **283A** to turn it alternatively on (conductive) and off (non-conductive), a third signal stdbyon which is distributed to the other parts of the device **280** as illustrated in the functional block diagram of FIG. 21 (supply of the signal stdbyon to the voltage regulator **322** is explicitly represented in the upper portion of FIG. 22).

(197) A possible sequence of operation of the circuit **281** may contemplate an ON active-standby state. This may be in addition to the conventional ON and OFF states of an electronic fuse, that is: an ON state (see also block **330** in the flow-chart of FIG. 23, discussed in the following), during which the load L (fully) energized with the load L coupled to the supply source SS through the **283** made conductive (with the **283A** non-conductive), and an OFF state (see also block **330A** in the flow-chart of FIG. 23), during which the **283** de-couples the load L from the supply source SS as a result of the **283** (as well as the **283A**) being made non-conductive; such an OFF state may be entered into in response to an overcurrent event as detected at **314** in FIG. 21, for instance.

(198) Operation of a device **280** as illustrated in FIG. 21 in those two ON and OFF states (see blocks **330** and **330A** in the flow-chart of FIG. 23) is conventional in the art, which makes it unnecessary to provide a more detailed description herein. Also, it will be again recalled that application to an electronic fuse is considered herein merely by way of non-limiting example. The embodiments are not linked by way of necessity to being applied in electronic fuses in so far as an ON active-standby state may be advantageous in various devices where it is desired that a small current may still flow to a load such as L while the overall current consumption of the circuit **281** is very low (less than 50 μ A, for instance, thus improving battery lifetime). The capability of switching to a (full) ON state with the power **283** turned quickly on (within 50-100 μ s since a

normal load current is requested, for instance) is likewise desirable.

(199) Operation of an implementation option as illustrated in FIG. 22 is exemplified in the flowchart of FIG. 23 assuming that after START the circuit **281** is in the (full) ON state as exemplified by block **330**. As noted, the **283** may be turned off (made non-conductive—OFF state **330A**) in order to de-couple the load L from the supply source SS in response to an overcurrent event in eFuse operation. As noted, this is conventional in the art (which makes it unnecessary to provide a more detailed description herein) and likewise not mandatory for the embodiments. Switching to the low-power-consumption ON active-standby state may be prompted by the occurrence of a triggering action as exemplified at STDBY. This may be indicated by a positive outcome Y of a check at block **331**; in the presence of a negative outcome N the circuit simply loops back upstream thus maintaining the (full) ON state. The triggering action exemplified at STDBY may involve the input node OSS being asserted (brought high, for instance) for a minimum time by the controller MC, while the circuit **281** is in the ON state, with the **283** conductive and the load L energized by the supply source SS. The input node OSS being asserted may be recognized by the device **281** as a command to enable the ON active-standby state. This command may be validated, for instance, as a result of the input node OSS being pulled-down, that is, brought to a low level.

(200) In response to entering the ON active-standby state (as exemplified by block **332** in FIG. 23), the logic circuitry **326** may: on the one hand, disable the main **283** via the driver **320** (signal Switch_GD-on/off indicating an off condition desired where the supply source SS is no longer coupled to the load L via the **283**), and on the other hand, enable the secondary **283A** to maintain a reduced current supply (350 mA-500 mA, for instance) to the load L. During the ON active-standby state, if the current supplied to the load L exceeds a threshold $I_{out_stdbyon}$ (500 mA @ $V_{BAT+}=13V$, $T=25^{\circ}C.$, for instance)—which corresponds to a positive outcome Y of a check exemplified by block **334** in FIG. 23—the logic circuitry **326** may switch back to the (full) ON state by: on the one hand, re-enabling the main **283** via the driver **320** (signal Switch_GD-on/off indicating an on condition desired), which can occur very rapidly; on the other hand, disabling the secondary **283A**.

(201) In the presence of a negative outcome N of the check represented by block **334**, the circuit simply loops back upstream thus maintaining the ON active-standby state. The related information on the intensity of the current supplied to the load L can be provided to the logic circuitry **326** via the comparator **328** in response to the comparison therein indicating that intensity of the current through the load L (indicated, for instance, by the re-activation signal which—as discussed in the foregoing—can be obtained as a result of a feedback action based on the voltage at the node OUT) has increased up to an intensity threshold as represented by V_{ref_1} . For instance, the circuit **281** can be configured so that if, during the ON active-standby state with, e.g., $I_{out}<350\text{ mA}$ any pin (with possible exceptions as represented, for instance, by the OSS node) is pulled up, the device **280** will go back to the (full) ON state, re-activating the power **283** and de-activating the secondary **283A**.

(202) Of course, the quantitative figures given herein are merely exemplary and non-limiting of the embodiments. The signal $stdbyon$ (which is indicative of the ON active-standby state being enabled and is distributed by the logic circuitry to the other parts of the device **280**) can be exploited in the voltage regulator **322** to selectively enable: the high-power (and higher consumption) regulator **322A**, such as a low dropout (LDO) regulator, during the (full) ON state with the power **283** turned on and the secondary **283A** turned off; or a low-power (and low-consumption) voltage pre-regulator **322B**, during the ON active-standby state with the power **283** turned off and the secondary **283A** turned on.

(203) More generally, as represented in FIG. 22 by the signal $stdbyon$ from the logic circuitry **326** distributed to the various other functionalities in the architecture **280** of FIG. 21, a current absorption management circuit as illustrated herein facilitates switching to a low-consumption state

(notionally turning-off) these functionalities, thus dramatically reducing energy absorption. This advantageously facilitates further reducing energy absorption from the supply source SS during the ON active-standby state. Also, waking-up from such a low-consumption state to a full operating state may take place quickly, with no appreciable discontinuities for the load L and the system as a whole. In FIG. 24, unless the context indicates otherwise, parts or elements like parts or elements already discussed in connection with the previous figures are indicated with like reference symbols, so that a corresponding description will not be repeated for brevity.

(204) FIG. 24 is exemplary of an implementation where the triggering action as exemplified at STDBY in the flowchart of FIG. 23 may result from a sensing action of the current through the load L with a command provided by an external controller MC no longer involved. In a circuit 281 as illustrated in FIG. 24, a sensing transistor 283B (a MOSFET transistor, for instance) is provided having the current path therethrough (source-drain in the case of a field-effect transistor such as a MOSFET transistor, for instance) coupled across the nodes VBAT+ and OUT and the control node (gate, in the case of a field-effect transistor such as a MOSFET transistor, for instance) coupled to the control node GD (again gate, in the case of a field-effect transistor such as a MOSFET transistor) of the power 283.

(205) The current (feedback) path through the sensing transistor 283B is also coupled to a (multi)sensing node MS configured to be coupled to ground GND, optionally via an (e.g., external) sensing resistor SR. Reference 335 denotes in FIG. 24 a further comparator which compares the (e.g., voltage) signal at the node MS with a further (possibly adjustable) threshold Vref_2 referenced to ground. The output signal from the comparator 335 is applied to the logic circuitry 326. During the (full) ON state, a device as illustrated in FIG. 24 will be able to detect (via the feedback current sensing network 283B, SR which supplies the comparator 335 with the signal compared with the threshold Vref_2) a condition where the current through the main 283, and thus through the load L, has decreased reaching a lower threshold value as defined by Vref_2 (250 mA @ VBAT+=13V, T=25° C., for instance).

(206) In some embodiments, the sensing network 283B, SR may be configured to operate with a very low current density and the resistance SR can be accordingly chosen (a resistance value of 420 KOhm was found to be a sensible choice) to generate Vms=4,15V @Iout=250 mA. Here again, these quantitative figures are merely exemplary and non-limiting of the embodiments. When such detection occurs (see STDBY in FIG. 23), the circuit will automatically enter the ON active standby state as represented by block 332 in the flow-chart of FIG. 23 after a fixed time (about 150 μs, for instance).

(207) Here again, during the ON active-standby state, if the current supplied to the load L exceeds a threshold Iout_stdbyon (500 mA @ VBAT+=13V, T=25° C., for instance) as indicated by a positive outcome Y of the check represented by block 334, the logic circuitry 326 may switch back to the (full) ON state. In the presence of a negative outcome N of the check represented by block 334, the circuit simply loops back upstream thus maintaining the ON active-standby state.

(208) In the case exemplified in FIG. 24, the related information on the intensity of the current supplied to the load L can be provided to the logic circuitry 326 via the comparator 328 as discussed previously in connection with FIG. 22, namely as a result of a feedback action based on the voltage at the node OUT. Here again, the circuit 281 can be configured so that if, during the ON active-standby state with, e.g., Iout<350 mA, any pin (with possible exceptions as represented, for instance, by the OSS node) is pulled up, the device 280 will go back to the (full) ON state, re-activating the power 283 and de-activating the secondary 283A.

(209) In some embodiments, the signal stdbyon which is indicative of the ON active-standby state being enabled and is distributed by the logic circuitry to the other parts of the device 280 may be exploited in the voltage regulator 322 to selectively enable: a high-power (and higher consumption) regulator 322A, such as a low dropout (LDO) regulator, activatable during the (full) ON state with the power 283 turned on and the secondary 283A turned off; or a low-power (and low-

consumption) voltage pre-regulator **322B**, activatable during the ON active-standby state with the power **283** turned off and the secondary **283A** turned on.

(210) More generally, as represented also in FIG. **24** by the signal *stdbyon* from the logic circuitry **326** distributed to the various other functionalities in the architecture **280** of FIG. **21**, a current absorption management circuit as illustrated herein facilitates switching to a low-consumption state (notionally turning-off) these functionalities, thus dramatically reducing energy absorption. This advantageously facilitates further reducing energy absorption from the supply source SS during the ON active-standby state. Also, waking-up from such a low-consumption state to a full operating state may take place quickly, with no appreciable discontinuities for the load L and the system as a whole.

(211) In some embodiments, a circuit as exemplified herein (for instance, **281**) may include: a first node (for instance, VBAT+) and a second node (for instance, OUT) configured to be coupled (respectively) to an electrical supply source (for instance, SS) and to an electrical load (for instance, L) configured to be supplied by the electrical supply source (for instance, SS) via an electronic switch (for instance, **283**) having a control node; and a third node (for instance, GD) configured to be coupled to the control node of the electronic switch to switch the electronic switch between a conductive state (for instance, **330**), wherein the electrical load is coupled to the supply source via the electronic switch, and a non-conductive state (for instance, **330A**, wherein the electrical load may not be coupled to the supply source via the electronic switch).

(212) A circuit as exemplified herein may (further) comprise: a secondary electronic switch (for instance, **283A**) intermediate the first node and the second node; control logic circuitry (for instance, **326**) coupled to the third node and the secondary electronic switch to provide a first switch control signal (for instance, *Switch_GD-on/off*) applied (for instance, via **320**) to the third node and a second switch control signal (for instance, *Switch_BS-on/off*) to the secondary electronic switch, the control logic circuitry (**20**) configured to provide the first switch control signal and the second switch control signal, alternately: in a first mode of operation (for instance, **330**), wherein the first switch control signal drives the electronic switch to the conductive state and the second switch control signal drives the secondary electronic switch to a non-conductive state; and in a second mode of operation (for instance, **332**), wherein the first switch control signal drives the electronic switch to the non-conductive state and the second switch control signal drives the secondary electronic switch to a conductive state, wherein the electrical load is coupled to the supply source via the secondary electronic switch.

(213) In some embodiments, the circuit may include a fourth node (for instance, OSS) configured to receive a standby signal (for instance, MC), wherein the circuit control logic circuitry is configured to switch to the second mode of operation (from the first mode of operation, for instance) in response to the standby signal received (for instance, **331**) at the fourth node. In some embodiments, the circuit may include current sensing circuitry (for instance, **283B**, SR, **335**) configured to sense the intensity of the current flowing through the electrical load, the current sensing circuitry coupled to the control logic circuitry, wherein the control logic circuitry is configured to switch from the first mode of operation to the second mode of operation in response to the current flowing through the electrical load dropping to a lower threshold (for instance, *Vref_2*).

(214) In some embodiments, the current sensing circuitry may comprise a sensing transistor (for instance, **283B**) having a control node coupled to the third node and a current path therethrough included in a current feedback line from the first node (for instance, VBAT+) to a further node (for instance, MS) configured to be coupled to ground, preferably via a resistor (for instance, SR). In some embodiments, the circuit may include current sensing circuitry (for instance **328** and **283A**) sensitive to the intensity of the current flowing through the electrical load, the current sensing circuitry coupled to the control logic circuitry, wherein the control logic circuitry is configured to switch from the second mode of operation to the first mode of operation in response to the current

flowing through the electrical load increasing to an upper threshold (as determined, for instance, by Vref_1). In some embodiments, the circuit may include supply regulator circuitry (for instance, 322) having a first supply regulator section (for instance, 322A) and a second supply regulator section (for instance, 322B), the second supply regulator section having lower energy absorption than the first supply regulator section, wherein the control logic circuitry is coupled (for instance, stdbyon) to the supply regulator circuitry and configured to enable the first supply regulator section during the first mode of operation and the second supply regulator section during the second mode of operation.

(215) In some embodiments, the secondary electronic switch (for instance, 283A) may comprise a low-power electronic switch. An electronic switch such a MOSFET transistor having a RDSon resistance (at full VGS) of about 281 Ohm may be exemplary of such a low-power switch. A circuit as exemplified herein may include the electronic switch having a control node (as assumed in FIG. 21, for instance), and the secondary electronic switch may comprise a low-power electronic switch configured to be traversed during conduction by a current of lower intensity than the current traversing the electronic switch during conduction.

(216) A system as exemplified herein (a power distribution system for use in the automotive sector, for instance) may comprise: an electrical supply source (for instance, SS); an electrical load (for instance, L); an electronic switch (for instance, 283) having a control node to switch the electronic switch between a conductive state, wherein the electrical load is coupled to the supply source via the electronic switch, and a non-conductive state (wherein the electrical load is not coupled to the supply source via the electronic switch); and a circuit (for instance, 281, with the 283 being a distinct component from the circuit—as illustrated in FIGS. 22 and 24, or included in the circuit as assumed in FIG. 21) as exemplified herein wherein the first node (for instance, VBAT+) is coupled to the electrical supply source (for instance, SS), the second node (for instance, OUT) is coupled to the electrical load (for instance, L) and the third node (for instance, GD) is coupled to the control node of the electronic switch (for instance, 283).

(217) In some embodiments, the system may include energy absorbing circuitry (see, for instance, the functionalities I, II, III in the system 280 FIG. 21) supplied by the supply source (for instance, SS), the energy absorbing circuitry settable to a low-energy absorption mode in response to the control logic circuitry (for instance, 326) in the circuit (for instance, 281) being actuated in the second mode of operation (for instance 332, with the signal stdbyon distributed to the functionalities I, II, III in the system 280 in FIG. 21).

(218) A method of operating a circuit or a system as exemplified herein may include actuating the control logic circuitry (for instance, 326), alternately: in the first mode of operation (for instance, 330), wherein the first switch control signal (for instance, Switch_GD-on/off) drives the electronic switch (for instance, 283) to the conductive state and the second switch control signal (for instance, Switch_BS-on/off) drives the secondary electronic switch (for instance, 283A) to a non-conductive state; and in the second mode of operation (for instance, 332), wherein the first switch control signal (for instance, Switch_GD-on/off) drives the electronic switch (for instance, 283) to the non-conductive state and the second switch control signal (for instance, Switch_BS-on/off) drives the secondary electronic switch (for instance, 283A) to a conductive state, wherein the electrical load (for instance, L) is coupled to the supply source (for instance, SS) via the secondary electronic switch.

(219) FIG. 25A-29 includes components, circuits, systems, and process that can be utilized within or incorporated by any of the self-testing features or circuitry described herein, in some embodiments. FIGS. 25A and 25B are architectural views of the interaction between an (in application) selftest controller 342 and functionalities as available in mixed analog/digital electronic circuits that can be controlled or observed in order to implement monitor and diagnostic checks. Those of skill in the art will otherwise appreciate that certain ones of these functionalities may not be visible in the figures insofar as the instant detailed description relates primarily to

functionalities discussed as exemplary of functionalities involved in self-test operation as discussed herein.

(220) Functionalities as exemplified in FIGS. 25A and 25B can co-operate with a self-test controller such as 342 can be found in a wide variety of electronic devices. While possible application to an e-fuse (electronic fuse) will be discussed in the following by way of example, the embodiments are largely “transparent” to the nature and characteristics of the device 340. One or more embodiments as exemplified herein may include a configurable and programmable digital controller 342 (in-application self-test controller) capable of: managing a set of control signals with the capability of forcing device configurations, acquisition ports for digitally converted values, data processing and fault/event emulation to execute real-time tests during normal operation of the device 340; and reacting to a possible failure detected, communicating with a host controller (for instance) and/or taking adequate actions for latency/critical situations or specific safety specifications.

(221) In the diagrams of FIGS. 25A and 25B, a block 346 denotes fail-safe device control circuitry which is illustrated here as incorporated to the circuit 10 but may be arranged external to the circuit 10. The circuitry 346 is utilized to co-operate with a control interface 358 in the self-test controller 342 exchanging therewith signals such as, for instance, abort/stop control signals from the fail-safe control circuitry 346 to the self-test controller 342 (in order to control operation of the latter), and/or diagnostic/alarm control signals from the self-test controller 342 to the fail-safe device control circuitry 14 (in order to implement low-latency fail-safe protection mechanisms). Communication can be programmed as desired, for instance, via a programming interface (UF) 360 for host-controller communication in possible co-operation with a serial peripheral interface (SPI) 360A.

(222) In one or more embodiments, the controller 342 may be configured to co-operate with a number of circuit elements or stages in the device including, for instance, an analog sensing stage 348, an analog-to-digital (A/D) conversion stage 350, and a fault/event detection stage 354 that form the functional backbone of the device 340. The diagrams of FIGS. 25A and 25B are exemplary of the flexibility of one or more embodiments in adapting to different devices 10 and different contexts of use. For instance, as exemplified in FIG. 25A, the analog sensing stage 348 may include a current sense circuit; the stage 350 may include a current sense analog-to-digital (A/D) converter. The fault/event detection stage 354 may include a hard short current (HSHT) and over-current (OVC) detection stage.

(223) Conversely, as exemplified in FIG. 25B, the analog sensing stage 348 may include a voltage sense circuit, sensing the drain-to-source of a power field-effect transistor such as a power MOS, for instance. The stage 350 may include a voltage monitor analog-to-digital (A/D) converter; and the fault/event detection stage 354 may include a voltage monitor fault detection stage. The foregoing is also (further) exemplary of the fact that, as discussed previously, a device 340 as exemplified herein may include alternative/additional functionalities which are not visible in the figures for simplicity.

(224) In one or more embodiments, the analog sensing stage 348 may be configured to co-operate with the controller 342 via an analog (configuration) interface (I/F) 362 in issuing control signals to arrange analog circuitry in the device 340 (not expressly visible in the figure) according to selected self-test configurations.

(225) As illustrated in the foregoing, and as discussed by way of example in the following, in the case of an e-fuse, these self-test configurations may include multiple self-test selection options (whose execution may be managed sequentially via corresponding hardware) such as external short circuit fault detection chain monitoring; external power MOS saturation fault detection chain monitoring; and external power MOS stuck-on detection monitoring.

(226) An A/D conversion stage 350 as illustrated herein may be configured for acquisition of digital converted measurements in the device 340 for data elaboration and/or checking. To that

effect, data thus collected by the stage **350** can be transferred to the controller **342** via a data acquisition interface **364**. As exemplified, a fault/event detection stage **354** as illustrated herein may be configured to cooperate with a fault/event emulation interface **366** in the controller **342** in setting configuration design parameters (thresholds and like, for instance) for fault/event generation and/or emulation. As illustrated, a datapath configuration feature (as schematically represented by **20**) can be provided intermediate to the acquisition circuitry **350**, **364** and the fault event detection circuitry **354**, **366** in order to facilitate a plurality of digital processing datapath configurations for the test signals converted to digital.

(227) Various suitable types of computation (for instance, differential or delta measurements on data acquisition) can be implemented in the self-test controller **342**. In one or more embodiments, self-test configuration and execution can be programmed via a Serial Peripheral Interface (SPI) such as **360A**. For instance, such an interface can be configured to exchange data between microcontrollers and small peripherals such as shift registers, sensors, and SD cards.

(228) In one or more embodiments, dedicated registers and fields can be mapped within a device address space with the capability of reporting status for each self-test run. For instance, IDLE/RUN/END/ABORT test information may be made available to a host controller through registers mapped in device address space. The block diagram of FIG. **26** is an exemplary representation of a possible embodiment of a controller **342** as included in a device **340** as illustrated in FIGS. **25A** and **25B**. The main functionality of a controller **342** as illustrated herein may be represented by a test sequencer circuit (briefly, test sequencer) **356**. The test sequencer **356** can be configured to control the execution of defined self-tests to be run, with other (internal) functionalities of the self-test controller **342** utilized to interact with the interfaces described previously in connection with FIGS. **25A** and **25B**.

(229) By way of example, the block diagram of FIG. **26** shows the self-test controller functionality interacting with the device control interface **358** configured to receive and transfer to the test sequencer **356** Abort/End control signals from control sources (at **378**) while issuing towards the device control entity latency critical control information (at **380**). Similarly, the self-test controller functionality interacting with the programming interface **360** may be configured to receive, decode and transfer to the test sequencer **356** test selection and configuration data (at **374**) while collecting into registers and transferring from test sequencer **356** data/status information and monitored fault checks for each executed self test (at **376**).

(230) The diagram of FIG. **26** is also exemplary of the device control interface **358** being configured to exchange with the test sequencer **356** auto-start control information at **372**, for those cases or tests in which execution is started according to hardware conditions and not controlled by software through a programming interface such as **360**, **374**. As exemplified in FIG. **26**, the self-test controller **342** can also be configured, according to the test under execution, to issue analog and datapath configuration control via the interface **362**, to receive test data from digital datapath, via the interface **364**, and elaborate/check the information received at **382** (for example, by performing delta measurements). In addition, the self-test controller **342** can be configured to manage the selection of a protection fault under test, by disabling the real fault flag of the device, to avoid false faults signaling, and by collecting the result of the emulation of fault/event detection under test via the interface **366** at **384**.

(231) FIG. **27** is exemplary of a possible solution which may be adopted in the test sequencer **356** in order to provide Abort/End mapping information for various tests starting from information as provided to the controller **342** at **378**. FIGS. **25A** and **25B** as discussed in the foregoing are exemplary of circuits (stages) which may be involved in a self-test procedure in the case of current sensing (FIG. **25A**) and in the case of voltage (Vds) monitoring (FIG. **25B**). The test sequencer **356** in the self-test controller **342** can be configured to execute such a procedure via a dedicated finite state machine (FSM) for each of these two tests, namely FSM1, cooperating with “Test1” registers T1R in a first test (FIG. **25A**), and FSM2, cooperating with “Test2” registers T2R in a second test

(FIG. 25B).

(232) FIG. 27 is exemplary of an embodiment of the test sequencer 356 configured to execute three tests, T1, T2, T3, with corresponding test enable signals TE1, TE2, TE3 derived from configuration selection information received at 374. Each test involves a respective finite state machine FSM1, FSM2, and FSM3, with the three FSMs linked together in order to be able to support both single (individual) test runs and sequences of tests (for instance sequences of two or three tests as exemplified herein). As exemplified in FIG. 27, the completion of execution of T1, controlled by FSM1, generates a signal T1END which, in response to being enabled by TE2, starts execution of test T2, controlled by FSM2; likewise, completion of test T2 by FSM2 generates a signal T2END which, in response to being enabled by TE3, starts of execution of T3 controlled by FSM3.

(233) As exemplified in FIG. 27, the completion of the execution of last test (T3 by FSM3, for instance) generates a signal T3END to notify the preceding FSMs (here, FSM1 and FSM2) that the test sequence has been completed. In that way, each FSM can transition to its IDLE state (as discussed in the following in connection with FIG. 28), together with the generation of a self-test end signal STE that notifies the device 340 comprising the self-test controller 342 that the test sequence has been completed with corresponding data/status information available in related registers, accessible through the programming interface 360, 376, as depicted in FIG. 26.

(234) FIG. 27 illustrates exemplary signals exchanged between the FSMs discussed previously and which facilitate starting and/or terminating execution of each self-test. For instance, in response to execution of FSM3 being terminated (T3END), a signal can be generated for FSM2 and FSM1 to complete execution thereof and/or transition to an IDLE state (STE), as discussed in connection with FIG. 28.

(235) FIG. 28 is exemplary of a possible arrangement of a finite state machine configured to execute a certain test, that is FSM1 or FSM2 or FSM3 in FIG. 27, and including four states, namely: a self-test idle state at 390; a self-test run state at 392; a self-test wait state at 394; and a self-test end state 396. As exemplified in FIG. 28, the state of the FSM may transition from self-test idle at 390 to self-test run 392 in response to a Test Start signal with the possibility for the FSM to return from the self-test run state 392 to the self-test idle state in response to a Test Abort signal under the control of device fail-safe functionality, in order to stop (immediately) self-test execution. Transitions of the FSM from the self-test run state 392 to the self-test end state 396 via the self-test wait state 394 may result from a Test Run End signal and a Test End signal subsequently issued. A self-test wait state 394 is advantageously introduced to allow (analog) circuits under test to return to their normal configuration and operation after the self-test execution is completed and the specific circuit configuration needed to run the test has been removed.

(236) Finally, transitioning from the self-test end state 396 back to the self-test idle state at 390 may be in response to a Last Test End signal with the possibility for the machine to transition from the selftest idle state 390 to the self-test end state 396 in response to a Test Skip signal received from the “last” FSM of the test sequencer 356, indicating the end of the execution of a programmed/configured self-test sequence. The transition from self-test idle state 390 to the self-test end state 396 in response to a Test Skip signal facilitates skipping the execution of a test in case this is not included in the test sequence as configured. By way of example, referring to FIG. 27, if the programmed self-test sequence comprises the execution of T1 and T3 (not T2), once T1 completed and the T2 FSM (notionally) enabled, assertion of the Test skip signal facilitates moving directly to the respective self-test end state 396 (without T2 being actually executed) enabling the FSM of T3 to start.

(237) FIG. 29 is a mixed graph/flowchart representation exemplary of an embodiment applied to a device 340 embedding, by way of example, electronic fuse (e-fuse) functionalities. In the exemplary case discussed herein, such a device 340 is equipped with a self-test controller 342 as discussed in the foregoing. For instance, the device (electronic fuse) 10 can be configured to transition from an unlocked state 400 (normal operation) to a self-test state 402, in response to a

corresponding (auto) start signal being asserted, for instance S_T_START=1 (see 358, 372 in FIG. 2, for instance). As exemplified in FIG. 29, permanence in the self-test state 402 is conditioned upon a watchdog (WD) for a possible expiration of a timeout interval and/or upon a hardware lockout condition (HWLO=1), both being examples of abort signals as previously mentioned coming from device failsafe control logic. This may result, for instance, in self-test sequence execution being aborted and in a correspondent transition of the device finite state machine from the self-test state 402 to a fail-safe state, a so called locked state 404 in the current example. Otherwise, as result of self-test completed, the system transitions back to an unlocked state 406. For instance, this may be in response to a stop signal S_T_STOP=1 being asserted (see again 358, 372 in FIG. 26, for instance) or in response to a stop signal S_T_STOP=1 being asserted from programming interface or device control (see 360-374 or 358-378 in FIG. 2).

(238) The right-hand side of FIG. 29 is exemplary of a possible sequence of steps or acts performed by the self-test controller 342 after activation by the device 340 (e-fuse in this case) with corresponding device FSM control transitions (UNLOCKED → custom character SELFTEST → custom character UNLOCKED). The step or act 408 is exemplary of a current sense self-test configuration for an e-fuse (considered herein as exemplary of the device 340) which leads to current sense self-test configuration parameters being set at 410, for instance CR#1 → custom character, S_T_CFG[2:0]=xx1 (x meaning a “don't care” bit), CR#2 → custom character OVC_THR=<user option> CR#3 → custom character HSHT_THR=<user option>.

(239) The first parameter CR#1 may be indicative of the selected self-test user wants to perform; in an embodiment, the least significant bit (S_T_CFG(0)) of a configuration word S_T_CFG[2:0] may select a current sense self-test execution. The two latter parameters CR#2 and CR#3 may be indicative of user-selected thresholds OVC_THR and HSHT_THR set for an over current (OVC_THR) fuse limit check or for a hard short current (HSHT_THR) limit check, in order to test proper behavior of current sense protections activation.

(240) The block designated 412 is exemplary of current sense self-test being executed (in response to S_T_START=1 being asserted). The blocks 414, 416 and 418 illustrated in FIG. 29 are exemplary of various acts which may be implemented via the stages 348, 350 and 354 in the device 340 in co-operation with the self-test controller 342 in FIGS. 25A and 25B. Such acts may include: block 414—turn-on/pull-down a current generator in the efuse 10 to produce an (additional) voltage drop on a current sense amplifier input in accordance with a selected self-test configuration; block 416—analog-to-digital (A/D) conversions of current sense circuit measurements, according to 414, with optional differential measurements performed between self-test measures and, for instance, a last measurement performed before the device 340 enters a self-test state, available as stored in device status register, in order to check proper functionality of all current sense measurement circuit chain. Also, A/D conversions may be used in combination with OVC and HSHT threshold settings (CR#2 and CR#3) to verify if fault protection is activated in case the converted values exceed selected thresholds, thus covering with the selected self-test also the protection trigger. Self-test measurements of both differential conversion and protection fault emulation check results can be made available on status registers of the device 340; block 418—self-test conclusion with the current generator in the e-fuse turned off/pulled down to restore normal drop on the current sense amplifier inputs with current sense A/D conversion discontinued during these timeframe.

(241) The blocks 414 and 416 may have a (joint) TS_T_ACTIVE time duration and the block 418 may have TS_T_WAIT time duration in order to have a self-controlled test duration and a safe transition from self-test configuration to normal operating mode configuration. During the TS_T_ACTIVE and TS_T_WAIT timeframes, Fast and Slow trip protections of the e-fuse corresponding to hard short (HSHT) and over current (OVC) conditions as discussed previously may be inhibited in order to allow their functional check, while avoiding to affect the device 340 (e-fuse, for instance), that continues to operate whilst all other protections are active. The block 420

in FIG. 29 is exemplary of the completion of a self-test procedure (current sense, for instance) with a TEST COMPLETED signal sent back to the device control (block 346 and interface 358 in FIGS. 25A and 25B) so that the device (e-fuse, for instance) can be returned to the unlocked state as exemplified by 406. As discussed, FIG. 29 is exemplary of application of embodiments to self-test configurations which are programmable through a serial peripheral interface (SPI) of the device with dedicated registers and fields mapped within device address space and multiple self-test configurations supported with execution managed sequentially via hardware.

(242) The (purely exemplary) case considered refers to an electronic device 340 comprising an electronic fuse (e-fuse). Such a device 340 may include analog sensing circuitry (see block 348 in FIGS. 25A and 25B) configurable (via the interface 362) to a plurality of self-test configurations comprising, for instance: an external short circuit fault detection chain monitor; an external power MOS saturation fault detection chain monitor; and an external power MOS stuck-on detection monitor, with such an analog sensing circuitry capable of sensing respective (voltage and/or current) test signals occurring in the analog circuitry when set to those self-test configurations. Similarly, in the (purely exemplary) case considered herein, digital processing circuitry (of any known type to those of skill in the art for that purpose) may be provided in order to perform processing as desired on data acquisitions (for instance, differential or “delta” measure computation and/or comparison against certain thresholds).

(243) It will be likewise assumed that status reporting for each self-test run as well as IDLE/RUN/END/ABORT test information is available to host controller through registers mapped in device address space. Table I and Table II below are exemplary of (purely indicative and non-limiting) values for control and status register bits and fields which may be adopted in order to control and monitor, via a programmable interface, self-test applications in a device 340 embedding a self-test controller 342 as discussed in the foregoing. Specifically, Table I is exemplary of a device control register view for self-test software configuration and control, with the columns in the table being indicative of: 1st column: bit position in control register dedicated to self-test; 2nd column: default value at reset; 3rd column: bit/field name; and 4th column: functional description according to the embodiment considered.

(244) TABLE-US-00001

TABLE I	Device control register view	Default	Transition	Bit value	signal
position at reset	(Bit/field name)	Functional description	9	0	S_T_START
When set to 1.	starts selected self-test	If current state is Unlocked and S_T_GFC is not 0000, then setting this bit causes a transition to Self-Test state. This bit is automatically reset.	8	0	S_T_STOP
When set to 1,	stops execution of selected self-test (when applicable). This bit is automatically reset	7:5	000	S_T_CFG	Self-test selection
S_T_CFG	Self-test selected	000	No selection	001	Current sense
010	VDS Detection	100	Power Switch Stuck-on	011	Current Sense + VDS Detection
101	Current Sense + Power Switch Stuck-on	110	VDS Detection + Power Switch Stuck-on	111	Current Sense + VDS Detection + Power Switch Stuck-on
Others	Reserved				

(245) Conversely, Table II is exemplary of a device status register view for self-test software configuration (current sense, for instance), with the columns in the table being indicative of: 1st column: bit position in device status register; 2nd column: default value at reset; 3rd column: bit/field register name; 4th column: functional description according to the embodiment discussed as example; 5th column: bit/field reset policy (per se not relevant for the embodiments).

(246) TABLE-US-00002

TABLE II	Device status register view	Bit	Default value	Transition	signal		
position at reset	(Bit/field name)	Functional description	14	0	S_T_HSHT		
This bit is set if HSHT_THR is R/C reached during CURRENT SENSE self-test (Emulation of hard short fault, as result of comparison between self-test current sense A/D conversion and hard short threshold setting)	13	0	S_T_OVC	This bit is set if OVC_THR is R/C reached during CURRENT SENSE self-test Emulation of over current protection fault, as result of comparison between self-test current sense A/D conversion and over current threshold setting	12 to 3	0000000000	S_T_CURR
10-bit ADC conversion of the R/C CURRENT SENSE, performed during CURRENT SENSE self-							

test (storage of A/D conversion performed during self-test) 2 + 1 00 S_T_CURR_STATUS Status of CURRENT SENSE R/C self-test 00 > IDLE: Self-test not started 01 > RUN: Self-test execution in progress 10 > END: Self-test completed successfully (consistent data available on dedicated registers) 00 > ABORT: Self-test aborted (watchdog timeout, HWLO, S_T_STOP when not required)

(247) An electronic device (for instance, a device **340** embedding an e-fuse) as exemplified herein may include analog circuitry configured to be set to at least one self-test configuration, as well as self-test controller circuitry (for instance, **12**) in turn comprising: an analog configuration and sensing circuit (for instance, **348, 362**) configured to set the analog circuitry to at least one self-test configuration and to sense test signals occurring in the analog circuitry set to the at least one self-test configuration; a data acquisition circuit (for instance, **350, 364**) configured to acquire and convert to digital the test signals sensed; and a fault event detection circuit (for instance, **354, 366**) configured to check the test signals converted to digital against reference parameters.

(248) In some embodiments, the self-test controller circuitry may include test coordination circuitry (for instance, the test sequencer **356**) having an input port (for instance, **358, 378**) configured to receive device control signals indicative of a set of self-test events, wherein the analog configuration and sensing circuit (for instance, **348, 362**) is configured to set (for instance, T1, T2, T3) the analog circuitry to a plurality of self-test configurations (for instance, TE1, TE2, TE3) as a function of device control signals received at the test coordination circuitry.

(249) The test sequencer **356** extensively discussed in the foregoing may be exemplary of such test coordination circuitry configured to co-ordinate performance of plurality of self-tests. This may occur in a certain “serial” sequence as described herein for simplicity. Those of skill in the art will otherwise appreciate that one or more embodiments may contemplate tests performed at least partly concurrently, that is in parallel to one another.

(250) In some embodiments, the test coordination circuitry (as exemplified by the sequencer **356**) may include a finite state machine (for instance, **390, 392, 394, 396**) sensitive to transition signals (for instance, ST_T_START, S_T_STOP) causing the test coordination circuitry to transition between idle states (for instance, **400, 406**) through a self-test state (for instance, **402**) during which the analog configuration and sensing circuit (**16, 362**) sets the analog circuitry to the at least one self-test configuration.

(251) In some embodiments, the finite state machine in the test coordination circuitry may be configured to transition to a locked state (for instance, **404**) in response to a self-test being aborted during the self-test state (for instance, **402**). In some embodiments, the self-test controller circuitry may include a datapath configuration circuit (for instance, **20**), intermediate the data acquisition circuit (**18, 364**), and the fault event detection circuit (**22, 366**), the datapath configuration circuit configured to provide a plurality of digital processing datapath configurations for the test signals converted to digital.

(252) A method of operating an electronic device as exemplified herein may include activating (for instance, **358, 372**) the self-test controller circuitry wherein, in response to the self-test controller circuitry being activated: the analog configuration and sensing circuit sets the analog circuitry to at least one self-test configuration and senses test signals occurring in the analog circuitry set to the at least one self-test configuration; the data acquisition circuit acquires and converts to digital the test signals sensed; the fault event detection circuit checks the test signals converted to digital against reference parameters and issues at least one fault detection signal (for instance, **376**) in response to the checking indicating the test signals converted to digital failing to match the reference parameters. In a method as exemplified herein, activating the self-test controller circuitry may include an auto-start control (for instance, **372**) of the self-test controller circuitry. In a method as exemplified herein, activating the self-test controller circuitry may include activating a plurality of self-test events (in a method as exemplified herein, T1, TE1; T2, TE2; T3, TE3), wherein the analog configuration and sensing circuit sets the analog circuitry to a plurality of self-test

configurations.

(253) FIGS. **30-35** illustrate components, circuits, systems, and processes that can be incorporated within or utilized by the external MOS temperature sensing subsystem **114**, in some embodiments. FIG. **30** illustrates an embodiment of a device **430** including a circuit **432** configured to determine the temperature of a transistor **434**. The device **430** may include a load **436**. The load **436** is powered by a supply voltage V_S , applied on a node. The supply voltage is for example a high voltage, in other words, the supply voltage is for example higher than 430V, for example higher than 458 V, for example substantially equal to 468 V.

(254) The load **436** is coupled between the node and a node on which is applied a reference voltage GND, for example the ground. The load may include a terminal **438** coupled to the node and another terminal coupled, preferably connected, to the node. The load **436** is coupled to the node by the transistor **434**. The transistor **434** is for example a Metal—oxide—semiconductor field effect transistor (MOSFET). The transistor **434** is for example a power MOSFET. The transistor **434** is for example a transistor with an n-type channel.

(255) A first terminal of the transistor **434**, corresponding to the source of the transistor **434**, is coupled, preferably connected, to the node **438** and a second terminal **440** of the transistor **434**, corresponding to the drain of the transistor **434**, is coupled, preferably connected, to the node. In FIG. **30**, the drain **440** of the transistor **434** is coupled to the node by a resistor **442**. A terminal of the resistor **442** is coupled, preferably connected, to node and another terminal of the resistor **442** is coupled, preferably connected, to the drain **440** of the transistor **434**.

(256) The device **430** may include a chip **444**. The chip **444** is for example an integrated circuit. The chip **444**, for example, may include several circuits not represented, configured to implement one or more functions. The chip **444** may include, in particular, a circuit **447** configured to control the transistor **434**. The chip **444** may include an input/output pad **446** on which is applied, by the circuit **447**, a control signal V_G of the transistor **434**. In other words, the circuit **447** may include an output, on which is generated the control signal V_G , coupled, preferably connected, to the input/output pad **446** of the chip **444**. The output **446** of the chip is coupled, preferably connected, to the gate of the transistor **434**. Therefore, the gate of the transistor **434** receives the signal V_G .

(257) The chip **444** is for example supplied with the supply voltage V_S . The chip **444** may include an input/output pad **448** coupled, preferably connected, to the node. The chip also may include an input/output pad **451** coupled, preferably connected, to a node on which is applied a reference voltage, for example the node on which is applied the voltage GND. The transistor **434** is an external component to the chip **444**. In other words, the transistor **434** is not included in the chip **444** or located on the chip **444**. Similarly, the load **436** and the resistor **442** are for example external to the chip **444**.

(258) The device **430** may include the circuit **432**. The circuit **432** is external to the chip **444**. The circuit **432** is configured to generate a signal DT, for example a voltage, representing the temperature around the circuit **432**. The circuit **432** is configured to generate the signal DT representing the temperature of the transistor **434**. The circuit **432** is close, and thermally coupled, enough to the transistor **434** that the variations of the signal DT represents the variation of the temperature of the transistor **434**. The circuit **432** may include an electrical component having a feature varying according to its temperature. This component is close enough to the transistor **434** that the variations of the signal DT represent the variation of the temperature of the transistor **434**. For example, the component is less than 1 mm from the transistor **434**.

(259) A terminal of the circuit **432** is coupled, preferably connected, to the drain **440** of the transistor **434**. Another terminal of the circuit **432** is coupled, preferably connected, to an input/output pad **450** of the chip **444**. The chip **444** further may include an input/output pad **452** coupled, preferably connected, to the drain **440** of the transistor **434**. The signal DT is for example the voltage between the two terminals of the circuit **432**. In other words, the signal DT is the voltage between the pads **450** and **452**. The transistor **434** for example may include a bulk

substrate.

(260) The bulk substrate is the heat dissipating terminal of the transistor **434**. Most of the heat generated by the transistor **434** is dissipated by the bulk. Said bulk substrate corresponds to the drain terminal. Therefore, having a terminal of the circuit **432** coupled, preferably connected, to the drain, in other words to the bulk substrate, of the transistor **434** ensures that the circuit **432** is close to the heat generated by the transistor **434** and that it does not need to be electrically insulated from the transistor. Therefore, the signal DT representing the temperature of the transistor **434** is more precise.

(261) The drain of the transistor **434** for example rests on a metal plate, forming the drain electrode. At least one component of the circuit **432** is for example formed in a semiconductor region resting on the metal plate. The heat generated in the transistor is therefore easily and quickly transferred from the transistor **434** to the circuit **432**. In consequence, a terminal of the circuit **432** is coupled to the node. The voltage on the input/output pad **452** is for example substantially equal to the voltage VS and the voltage on the input **450** is for example substantially equal to the voltage VS minus the voltage DT. Both values of voltage are high values, for example higher than 20 V. Such values might not be used by any circuit powered by a lower supply voltage, for example a supply voltage lower than 10 V, without damaging the component. For example, analog to digital converter might not be used on such signals.

(262) The chip **444** may include a circuit **454**. The circuit **454** is configured to generate a signal, or voltage, representing the temperature of the transistor **434**. For example, the circuit **454** is configured to generate a signal corresponding to the voltage DT in a different voltage domain. For example, the circuit **454** is configured to provide the signal to the circuit **447**. The circuit **454** is for example coupled, preferably connected, to the circuit **447**. Furthermore, the circuit **454** may include a level shifter, not represented. The signal generated by the circuit **454** is for example shifted to a logic level. In other word the voltage generated by the circuit **436** can safely be used by circuit configured to be powered by a supply voltage lower than 10 V, for example substantially equal to 5 V.

(263) The circuit **454** for example may include a terminal coupled to the pad **451** by a current source **456**. The circuit **432** could be placed physically close to the transistor **434** without connecting the circuit **432** to the drain of the transistor **434**. For example, a terminal of the circuit **432** could be coupled to the node. Therefore, the circuit **432** could have been configured to be supplied with a supply voltage lower than the voltage VS, for example a voltage lower than 10 V, for example the supply voltage of logic circuits. In that case, the control circuit **454** associated to the circuit **432** would be in a different voltage domain than the transistor **434** and would not need to include a level shifter. However, the circuit **432** would need to be electrically insulated from the transistor **434**. Any type of electrical insulation would imply some level of thermal insulation. Therefore, the measure of the temperature would be less precise and slower to react in case of overheating.

(264) FIG. **31** illustrates another embodiment of a device including a circuit configured to determine the temperature of a transistor. More precisely, FIG. **31** illustrates in more detail a version of the embodiment of FIG. **30**. FIG. **31** may include all the elements of FIG. **30**, which will not be described again.

(265) In the variant of FIG. **31**, the circuit **432** may include a thermistor **432a**, in other words a type of resistor whose resistance is strongly dependent on temperature. For example, the circuit **432** only may include the thermistor **432a**. The thermistor **432a** is for example a thermistor with a negative temperature coefficient (NTC). The thermistor **432a** is an external component to the chip **444**. The thermistor **432a** is coupled between the drain **440** of the transistor **434** and the input/output pad **450**. In other words, a terminal of the thermistor **432a** is coupled, preferably connected, to the drain **440** of the transistor **434**. Another terminal of the thermistor is coupled, preferably connected, to the pad **450**, and therefore to the circuit **454**. For example, the thermistor **432a** is less than 1 mm

from the transistor **434**. As the drain **440** is coupled, preferably connected, to the pad **452**, the thermistor **432a** is coupled between the pads **450** and **452**. The voltage DT representing the temperature of the transistor **434** corresponds to the voltage between the terminals of the thermistor **432a**. According to another embodiment, the thermistor **432a** could for example be a thermistor with a positive temperature coefficient (PTC).

(266) FIG. **32** illustrates in more detail an example of implementation of the embodiment of FIG. **31**. FIG. **32** may include all the elements of FIG. **31**, which will not be described again. The circuit **454** may include a floating supply. In the example of FIG. **32**, the floating supply is implemented by a voltage source **458** coupled in series with the current source **456**. The sources **456** and **458** are coupled between the pads **452** and **451**. The source **458** is coupled between the pad **452** and a node **460** and the source **456** is coupled between the node **460** and the pad **451**. In other words, a terminal, for example the positive terminal (+) of the source **458** is coupled, preferably connected, to the pad **452** and another terminal, for example the negative terminal, of the source **458** is coupled, preferably connected, to the node **460**. A terminal of the source **456** is coupled, preferably connected, to the pad **451** and another terminal of the source **456** is coupled, preferably connected, to the node **460**.

(267) The circuit **454** may include a level shifter. The level shifter may include an amplifier **462**. The amplifier **462** may include first and second inputs configured to receive the voltage DT. In other words, the first input, for example the negative input (-), is coupled, preferably connected, to the pad **450**, in other words to one of the terminals of the thermistor **432a**. The second input, for example the positive input (+), is coupled, preferably connected, to the pad **452**, in other words to the other one of the terminals of the thermistor **432a**.

(268) The amplifier **462** also may include a terminal configured to receive a first supply voltage V^+ . Said terminal is for example coupled, preferably connected, to the pad **452**. The voltage V^+ is for example substantially equal to the voltage V_S . The amplifier **462** also may include a terminal configured to receive a second supply voltage V^- . Said terminal is for example coupled, preferably connected, to the node **460**. The voltage V^- is for example lower than the first supply voltage V^+ .

(269) The amplifier **462** may include first and second outputs configured to generate a voltage DTS, corresponding to the voltage DT shifted to another voltage domain. In other words, the first output, for example the negative output (-), is coupled, preferably connected, to the pad **451**, in other words to the node of application of the reference voltage GND. The second output, for example the positive output (+), is coupled, preferably connected, to a node **464**. Therefore, the voltage DTS on the node **464** is referenced on the reference voltage GND.

(270) In the example of FIG. **32**, the circuit **454** may include a converter **468** analog to digital (ADC). The converter **468** may include an input coupled, preferably connected, to the node **464**. The converter **468** may include an output on which is generated a digital signal representing the signal DT. Said output is for example coupled, preferably connected, to an input/output pad **470**. Therefore, the chip **444** for example generates on the pad **470** a binary signal representing the temperature of the transistor **434**. The node **464** is also for example coupled, preferably connected, to an input/output pad **472**, for example by an amplifier **474**. In other words, the amplifier **474** may include an input coupled, preferably connected, to the node **464** and an output coupled, preferably connected, to the pad **472**. Therefore, the chip **444** for example generates on the pad **472** an analog signal representing the temperature of the transistor **434**.

(271) According to another embodiment, the chip **444** can include the converter **468** and the pad **470** but not the amplifier **474** and the pad **472**. The chip **444** can also include the amplifier **474** and the pad **472** and not the converter **468** and the pad **470**. Either or both of the pads **470** and **472** can for example be coupled to a circuit not represented configured to determine if the temperature of the transistor **434** is higher than a given value. If this is the case, the circuit can ensure that the transistor is switched off, for example by changing the value of the control signal on the gate of the transistor **434**.

(272) According to another embodiment, the circuit not represented configured to determine if the temperature of the transistor **434** is higher than a given value is located on the chip **444**. Therefore, the output of the converter **468** and/or the output of the amplifier **474** can be coupled, preferably connected, to the circuit not represented and may not be coupled to input/output pads. Said circuit not represented can for example be associated with the circuit configured to generate the control signal of the transistor **434**.

(273) In the example of FIG. **32**, the device also may include a resistor **476**. The resistor **476** is for example external to the chip **444**. The resistor is coupled in series with the thermistor **432a** between the drain **440** and the node **460**. More precisely, the resistor **476** is coupled between the input/output pad **450** and an input/output pad **478** of the chip **444**. A terminal of the resistor **476** is coupled, preferably connected, to the pad **450** and another terminal of the resistor **476** is coupled, preferably connected, to the pad **478**. The pad **478** is coupled, preferably connected, to the node **460**.

(274) FIG. **33** illustrates another embodiment of a device including a circuit configured to determine the temperature of a transistor. FIG. **33** may include all the elements of FIG. **32**, which will not be described again. The device of FIG. **33** differs from the device of FIG. **32** in that the thermistor **432a** is replaced by resistors **480** and **481** and a diode **432b**. Therefore the circuit **432** may include the resistors **480** and **481** and the diode **432b**. The resistors **480** and **481** are coupled in series between the node **440** and a node **484**. In other words, a terminal of the resistor **480** is coupled, preferably connected, to the drain **440** and to the pad **452**. Another terminal of the resistor **480** is coupled, preferably connected, to the pad **450**.

(275) A terminal of the transistor **481** is coupled, preferably connected, to the pad **450** and another terminal is coupled, preferably connected, to the node **484**. In this embodiment, the resistor **476** is coupled between the node **484** and the pad **478**. In other words, a terminal of the resistor **476** is coupled, preferably connected, to the node **484** and another terminal of the resistor **476** is coupled, preferably connected, to the pad **478**. The pad is therefore coupled to the pad **450** by two resistors in series.

(276) The diode **432b** of circuit **432** may include a terminal, for example the anode, coupled, preferably connected, to the drain **440**. The diode **432b** may include another terminal, for example the cathode, for example coupled, preferably connected, to the node **484**. Therefore, the diode **432b** is coupled in parallel with the association of the resistors **480** and **481**. The voltage between the terminals of the diode **432b**, corresponding substantially to the voltage between the pads **452** and **58**, is dependent on the temperature of the transistor **434**. Furthermore, the voltage DT, corresponding to the voltage between the pads **450** and **452**, depends on the voltage between the terminals of the diode **432b** and therefore on the temperature. The diode **432b** is preferably located as close as possible to the transistor **434**. For example, the semiconductor region corresponding to the anode of the diode **432b** lays, and is preferably in contact with, the metal plate on which lays the semiconductor region corresponding to the drain of the transistor **434**.

(277) FIG. **34** illustrates in more detail a part of the embodiments of FIGS. **448** to **451**. More precisely, FIG. **34** represents in more detail a part of the circuit **454**. FIG. **34** represents the pads **448**, **450**, **452** and **478** as well as the thermistor **432a** and the resistor **476** of FIG. **32**. These elements are the same as in FIG. **32** and will not be described again.

(278) FIG. **34** represents a floating supply **480** and a level shifter **501**. The floating supply **480** and the level shifter **501** are included in the circuit **454**. The floating supply **480** and the level shifter **501** are preferably located on the chip **444**. The floating supply **480** for example replaces the sources **456** and **458** of FIG. **32**. The level shifter for example replaces the amplifier **462**. The floating supply **480** may include a transistor **486**. The transistor **486** is for example a MOSFET. The transistor **486** has for example a p-type channel. The transistor **486** is coupled between the pad **478** and the node of application of the reference voltage GND. In other words, a terminal of the transistor **486**, drain or source, for example the source, is coupled, preferably connected, to the pad

478 and another terminal of the transistor **486**, drain or source, for example the drain, is coupled, preferably connected, to the node.

(279) The floating supply **480** may include an operational amplifier **488**. The amplifier **488** is configured to generate the control signal of the transistor **486**. The amplifier **488** may include an output coupled, preferably connected, to the control terminal, or gate, of the transistor **486**. The amplifier **488** may include a non-inverting input coupled, preferably connected, to a node **490**. The amplifier **488** may include an inverting input coupled, preferably connected, to the pad **478**. The amplifier **488** receives the supply voltage VS. More precisely, the amplifier may include an input coupled, preferably connected, to the node **448** and another input coupled, preferably connected, to a node of application of a reference voltage GND2. The voltage GND2 is for example different from the reference voltage GND.

(280) The floating supply **480** also may include a resistor **492**, a transistor **494** and a resistor **496** coupled in series between the pad **452** and the node. More precisely, the resistor **492** is coupled between the pad **452** and the node **490**. In other words, a terminal of the resistor **492** is coupled, preferably connected, to the pad **452** and another terminal of the resistor **492** is coupled, preferably connected, to the node **490**.

(281) The transistor **494** is for example a MOSFET. The transistor **494** has for example an n-type channel. The transistor **494** is coupled between the node **490** and a node **498**. In other words, a terminal of the transistor **494**, drain or source, for example the source, is coupled, preferably connected, to the node **498** and another terminal of the transistor **494**, drain or source, for example the drain, is coupled, preferably connected, to the node **490**.

(282) The resistor **496** is coupled between the node **498** and the node. In other words, a terminal of the resistor **496** is coupled, preferably connected, to the node **498** and another terminal of the resistor **496** is coupled, preferably connected, to the node. The floating supply **480** further may include an operational amplifier **500**. The amplifier **500** is configured to generate the control signal of the transistor **494**. The amplifier **500** may include an output coupled, preferably connected, to the control terminal, or gate, of the transistor **494**. The amplifier **500** may include a non-inverting input configured to receive a set voltage VH. The amplifier **500** may include an inverting input coupled, preferably connected, to the node **498**.

(283) The current source **456** of FIG. 32 is replaced in FIG. 34 by the amplifier **500**, the transistor **494** and the resistor **496**. The voltage source of FIG. 32 is replaced in FIG. 34 by the resistor **492**, the operational amplifier **488** and the transistor **486**. The level shifter **501** may include a resistor **502**, a transistor **504** and a resistor **506** coupled in series between the pad **452** and the node. More precisely, the resistor **502** is coupled between the pad **452** and a node **508**. In other words, a terminal of the resistor **502** is coupled, preferably connected, to the pad **452** and another terminal of the resistor **502** is coupled, preferably connected, to the node **508**.

(284) The transistor **504** is for example a MOSFET. The transistor **504** has for example a p-type channel. The transistor **504** is coupled between the node **508** and a node **510**. In other words, a terminal of the transistor **504**, drain or source, for example the source, is coupled, preferably connected, to the node **508** and another terminal of the transistor **504**, drain or source, for example the drain, is coupled, preferably connected, to the node **510**. The resistor **506** is coupled between the node **510** and the node. In other words, a terminal of the resistor **506** is coupled, preferably connected, to the node **510** and another terminal of the resistor **506** is coupled, preferably connected, to the node. The node **510** correspond to the output of the level shifter. Therefore, the voltage DTS of FIG. 32 corresponds to the voltage between the nodes **510** and. The node **510** is for example coupled to a converter analog to digital, such as the converter **468** of FIG. 32, and/or to an amplifier, such as the amplifier **474** of FIG. 32.

(285) The level shifter **501** further may include an operational amplifier **512**. The amplifier **512** is configured to generate the control signal of the transistor **504**. The amplifier **512** may include an output coupled, preferably connected, to the control terminal, or gate, of the transistor **504**. The

amplifier **512** may include a non-inverting input coupled, preferably connected, to the pad **450**. The amplifier **512** may include an inverting input coupled, preferably connected, to the node **508**. The amplifier **512** receives the supply voltage **VS**. More precisely, the amplifier **512** may include an input coupled, preferably connected, to the node **448** and another input coupled, preferably connected, to the node of application of the reference voltage **GND2**.

(286) FIG. **35** illustrates another embodiment of a device including a circuit **432a** configured to determine the temperature of a transistor **434**. More precisely, FIG. **35** represents an alternative to the circuit **454** of FIG. **32**. The device of FIG. **35** may include several elements of the device of FIG. **32**, which will not be described again. In particular, the device of FIG. **35** may include the resistor **442**, the thermistor **432a**, the resistor **476**, the transistor **434**, the load **436** and the sources **456** and **458**.

(287) The device of FIG. **35** differs from the device of FIG. **32** in that the circuit **454** does not include the converter **468**, that the amplifier **462** of FIG. **32** is replaced by a comparator **514** and the amplifier **474** is replaced by a digital output buffer **518**. The chip **444** does not, therefore, include the pad **470** configured in FIG. **32** to provide the binary output signal. The comparator **514** may include an output, for example a single output, coupled to the pad **472** by the buffer **518**. The output of the comparator is coupled, preferably connected, to an input of the buffer **518**. An output of the buffer is coupled, preferably connected, to the pad **472**.

(288) The comparator **514** may include, like the amplifier **462** of FIG. **32**, a terminal configured to receive a first supply voltage V^+ . Said terminal is for example coupled, preferably connected, to the pad **452**. The voltage V^+ is for example substantially equal to the voltage **VS**. The comparator **514** also may include a terminal configured to receive a second supply voltage V^- . Said terminal is for example coupled, preferably connected, to the node **460**. The voltage V^- is for example lower than the first supply voltage V^+ .

(289) The comparator **514** may include an input, for example a negative input ($-$), coupled, preferably connected, to the pad **450**. The comparator **514** may include another input, for example a positive ($+$) input, coupled to the pad **452** by a voltage source **516**. In other words, a terminal of the source **516**, for example the positive ($+$) terminal, is coupled, preferably connected, to the node **452** and another terminal of the source **516** is coupled, preferably connected, to the input of the amplifier **462**, for example the positive input. The embodiment of FIG. **35** compares the temperature of the transistor **434** to a given threshold. More precisely, the circuit **444** compares, with the comparator **514**, a voltage value on the pad **450** representing the temperature of the transistor **434** to a voltage, provided by the source **516**. Therefore, the circuit **444** provides on the pad **472** a first value if the temperature of the transistor **434** is below the threshold and a second value if the temperature of the transistor **434** is above the threshold. An advantage of the embodiments describes is that the detection of the temperature is more precise and faster.

(290) FIG. **36** illustrates an NTC bridge circuit **538**, in accordance with some embodiments. The NTC bridge **538** is coupled to external resistors R_{ntc} and R_t via terminals $ISNS_N$, NTC , and NTC_M . The NTC bridge **538** includes voltage source **VDC** and a bias generator **BIAS**. The NTC bridge **538** includes a transistor coupled between resistors **R**. The output of the NTC bridge **538** corresponds to the node between the source terminal of the transistor and the lower resistor **R**. The voltage drop V_{NTC} across the lower resistor **R** corresponds to the output of the NTC bridge **538** and is provided to an ADC for conversion. Other components and configurations can be utilized without departing from the scope of the present disclosure.

(291) Some embodiments utilize a universal $I_{sup.2t}$ control curve (or universal eFuse) that is defined with a finite number of points (current, reaction time) where all the values of the current are normalized to the maximum current in DC (when reaction time $= \infty$). In other words the curve is described with a two column matrix where the element of the first column are the normalized currents (**1**, **K1**, **K2**, . . . **Kn**) and the second column are the reaction times (∞ , **t1**, **t2**, . . . , **tn**). Any safety area defined in the IT diagram to specify the $i_{sup.2t}$ capability of a given conductor size can

be expressed by multiplying each K parameter by INOM where INOM is the MAX DC current specified for the given conductor size (or wire harness). In some embodiments, a series of reaction times may be expressed as a multiple of $\frac{1}{2} \cdot \text{sup.}(n+1)$, however, it is possible to obtain the same result with different selection of the reaction times. In other words, the reaction times can be selected in an arbitrary way, in some embodiments, and for each arbitrary reaction time we can define a normalized value of the current.

(292) In some embodiments, normalized (1, K1, K2, . . . Kn) parameters applied to the method to allow the system to react when the current IRMS (Current Mean Square Root) flows in the conductor for a time higher than the time defined by the safety area limited by the obtained I.sup.2t curve. This is valid for any shape of current waveform (square wave, triangular, any random behavior).

(293) In some embodiments, a method for setting the timing of the I.sup.2t control so that the speed of the E-Fuse can be changed respect to a nominal value without changing the nominal DC current. This allow the I.sup.2t curve to be adapted to cables with different thermal capacity (ex: Al instead of Cu) but with the same nominal current.

(294) The various embodiments described herein can be combined to provide further embodiments. These and other changes can be made to the embodiments in light of the above-detailed description. In general, in the following claims, the terms used should not be construed to limit the claims to the specific embodiments disclosed in the specification and the claims, but should be construed to include all possible embodiments along with the full scope of equivalents to which such claims are entitled. Accordingly, the claims are not limited by the disclosure.

Claims

1. An electronic fuse, comprising: current sensing circuitry configured to sense a current in a conductor coupled between a power supply and a load and to generate a current sensing signal indicative of the sensed current; current squared times time (I2t) circuitry that emulates an I2t curve of the conductor, the I2t circuitry configured to receive the current sensing signal and determine whether the sensed current exceeds the I2t curve of the conductor; and at least one of: external MOSFET temperature sensing circuitry configured to sense a temperature of an external MOSFET coupled to the conductor; low current bypass circuitry configured to supply a reduced current to the load in a low power consumption mode during which the external MOSFET is in a non-conductive state; or desaturation sensing circuitry configured to sense a drain-source voltage of the external MOSFET.

2. The electronic fuse of claim 1, further comprising a gate driver configured to receive a control signal from the I2t circuitry in response to the I2t circuitry determining that the sensed current exceeds the I2t curve of the conductor, and switch the external MOSFET into the non-conductive state in response to receiving the control signal.

3. The electronic fuse of claim 1 wherein the I2t circuitry includes: logic circuitry configured to compare the sensed current to a plurality of first thresholds, each of the plurality of first thresholds being different from one another; and counter circuitry configured to adjust a counting value speed and direction based on the comparison of the sensed current to each of the plurality of first thresholds, and generate an overflow signal in response to the counting value reaching or exceeding a threshold counting value.

4. The electronic fuse of claim 3 wherein the I2t circuitry further includes: latch-off circuitry including a comparator configured to compare the sensed current to a second threshold, and generate an interrupt signal in response to the sensed current exceeding the second threshold.

5. The electronic fuse of claim 4, further comprising: a gate driver, wherein the latch-off circuitry includes a logical OR gate, including: a first input coupled to an output of the counter circuitry, a second input coupled to an output of the comparator, and an output coupled to an input of the gate

driver, wherein the logical OR gate is configured to output a control signal to the gate driver in response to receiving the overflow signal or the interrupt signal, the gate driver configured to switch the external MOSFET into the non-conductive state in response to receiving the control signal.

6. The electronic fuse of claim 1 wherein the current sensing circuitry is configured to sense the current in the conductor by sensing the current through a shunt resistor that is electrically coupled in series to the conductor between the power supply and the load, and to generate a voltage indicative of the sensed current.

7. The electronic fuse of claim 6 wherein the current sensing circuitry includes an analog-to-digital converter (ADC) configured to convert the voltage indicative of the sensed current into a digital voltage signal.

8. The electronic fuse of claim 7 wherein the current sensing circuitry includes self-testing circuitry configured to test a current sensing function of the current sensing circuitry, and generate a test signal indicating a result of the test.

9. The electronic fuse of claim 8 wherein the self-testing circuitry includes: a first comparator configured to perform a first comparison of the digital voltage signal to a first voltage threshold; and a second comparator configured to perform a second comparison of the digital voltage signal to a second voltage threshold, wherein the self-testing circuitry is configured to generate the test signal based on the first and second comparisons.

10. The electronic fuse of claim 1, comprising the external MOSFET temperature sensing circuitry, the external MOSFET temperature sensing circuitry including temperature sensitive resistor circuitry configured to sense a voltage across a temperature sensitive resistor, the temperature sensitive resistor having a first terminal coupled to a drain of the external MOSFET, wherein the electronic fuse is configured to switch the external MOSFET into the non-conductive state based on the sensed voltage across the temperature sensitive resistor.

11. The electronic fuse of claim 10, further comprising: temperature monitoring logic circuitry coupled to an output of the external MOSFET temperature sensing circuitry, the temperature monitoring logic circuitry including a comparator configured to: receive a signal indicative of the sensed voltage across the temperature sensitive resistor, compare the received signal to a threshold, and generate an external MOSFET switch-off signal in response to the received signal exceeding the threshold.

12. The electronic fuse of claim 10 wherein the electronic fuse is configured to switch the external MOSFET into the non-conductive state based on the sensed voltage across the temperature sensitive resistor autonomously and without intervention or instruction from circuitry or devices external to the electronic fuse.

13. The electronic fuse of claim 1, comprising the low current bypass circuitry, the low current bypass circuitry including: a bypass transistor selectively operable to supply the reduced current to the load in the low power consumption mode; V_{ds} sensing circuitry configured to sense a voltage drop across the bypass transistor; and a comparator configured to compare the sensed voltage drop across the bypass transistor to a reference voltage and generate a control signal in response to the sensed voltage drop across the bypass transistor exceeding the reference voltage.

14. The electronic fuse of claim 13, further comprising bypass logic circuitry coupled to an output of the comparator, the bypass logic circuitry configured to: generate a bypass transistor switch off signal in response to receiving the control signal; and generate an external MOSFET switch on signal in response to receiving the control signal.

15. The electronic fuse of claim 14 wherein the bypass logic circuitry is configured to generate the external MOSFET switch on signal autonomously and without intervention or instruction from circuitry or devices external to the electronic fuse.

16. The electronic fuse of claim 1, comprising the desaturation sensing circuitry, the desaturation sensing circuitry including: an analog-to-digital converter (ADC) configured to generate a digital

signal indicative of the sensed drain-source voltage of the external MOSFET.

17. The electronic fuse of claim 16, further comprising desaturation logic circuitry, the desaturation logic circuitry including a comparator configured to compare the digital signal to a threshold, and generate an external MOSFET switch off signal in response to the comparison.

18. The electronic fuse of claim 16 wherein the desaturation sensing circuitry further includes self-testing circuitry configured to test a voltage sensing function of the desaturation sensing circuitry, and to generate a test signal indicating a result of the test.

19. The electronic fuse of claim 1, comprising each of the external MOSFET temperature sensing circuitry, the low current bypass circuitry, and the desaturation sensing circuitry.

20. The electronic fuse of claim 1, further comprising: register circuitry configured to store information associated with a status or condition of the electronic fuse, a status or condition of the external MOSFET, or a measured parameter value received from one of the current sensing circuitry, the I²t circuitry, the external MOSFET temperature sensing circuitry, the low current bypass circuitry, or the desaturation sensing circuitry; and a communication interface communicatively coupled to the register circuitry, the communication interface configured to facilitate communication between a microcontroller and the register circuitry.

21. A device, comprising: current sensing circuitry configured to sense a current in a conductor coupled between a power supply and a load, and generate a current sensing signal indicative of the sensed current; current squared times time (I²t) circuitry that emulates an I²t curve of the conductor, the I²t circuitry configured to receive the current sensing signal and determine whether the sensed current exceeds the I²t curve of the conductor; and self-testing circuitry configured to test a current sensing function of the current sensing circuitry, and generate a test signal indicating a result of the test.

22. The device of claim 21 wherein the self-testing circuitry includes: a first comparator configured to compare a signal indicative of the sensed current to a first threshold, and output a first comparison signal; and a second comparator configured to compare the signal indicative of the sensed current to a second threshold, and output a second comparison signal, wherein the self-testing circuitry is configured to generate the test signal based on the first and second comparison signals.

23. A system, comprising: a power supply; a load; a conductor electrically coupled to the power supply and the load; current sensing circuitry configured to sense a current in the conductor, and generate a current sensing signal indicative of the sensed current; and current squared times time (I²t) circuitry, including: logic circuitry configured to compare the sensed current to a plurality of first thresholds, each of the plurality of first thresholds being different from one another; counter circuitry configured to adjust a counting value speed and direction based on the comparison of the sensed current to each of the plurality of first thresholds, and generate an overflow signal in response to the counting value reaching or exceeding a threshold counting value; and latch-off circuitry including a comparator configured to compare the sensed current to a second threshold, and generate an interrupt signal in response to the sensed current exceeding the second threshold.

24. The system of claim 23, further comprising: a gate driver, wherein the latch-off circuitry includes a logical OR gate, including: a first input coupled to an output of the counter circuitry, a second input coupled to an output of the comparator, and an output coupled to an input of the gate driver, wherein the logical OR gate is configured to output a control signal to the gate driver in response to receiving the overflow signal or the interrupt signal, the gate driver configured to switch the external MOSFET into the non-conductive state in response to receiving the control signal.

25. A method, comprising: sensing, with current sensing circuitry, a current in a conductor coupled between a power supply and a load; generating a current sensing signal indicative of the sensed current; emulating, with current squared times time (I²t) circuitry, an I²t curve of the conductor, determining whether the sensed current exceeds the I²t curve of the conductor; testing, with self-

testing circuitry, a current sensing function of the current sensing circuitry; and generating a test signal indicating a result of the test.

26. The method of claim 25, wherein the self-testing circuitry includes: a first comparator configured to compare a signal indicative of the sensed current to a first threshold, and output a first comparison signal; and a second comparator configured to compare the signal indicative of the sensed current to a second threshold, and output a second comparison signal, wherein the self-testing circuitry is configured to generate the test signal based on the first and second comparison signals.
