FAULT TOLERANT ACTIVE CURRENT SHARING

BACKGROUND OF THE INVENTION

1. Field of the Invention

The present invention relates in general to regulating power supplies, and in particular to a system and method for load-balancing within a parallel power supply. Still more particularly, the present invention relates to an open-loop system in which an external voltage source provides an independent reference for balancing a current load within a parallel power supply.

2. Description of Related Art

Conventional power supply systems often utilize multiple power supply circuits connected in parallel for improving load variation adaptability and increased reliability. Examples of such parallel power supply systems can be found in Malik, U.S. Pat. No. 5,319,536, Gerner, U.S. Pat. No. 5,266,838, and Linde, U.S. Pat. No. 5,745,670.

Referring now to **FIG's 1, 2, and 3**, conventional parallel power supply systems **101, 201, and 301** are illustrated. As shown in **FIG. 1**, parallel power supply system **101**, which includes two parallel power supply modules, PS1 **102** and PS2 **104** that provide independent sources of power to a system load **106**. PS1 **102** and PS2 **104** generate output currents I1 **108** and I2 **110**, respectively. Included among the advantages provided by the parallel configuration of power supply system **101** over a unitary power supply system are reduced power supply component costs, enhanced operational flexibility, and improved system reliability.

In the interest of uniformity of device stress and corresponding reduced device failure rates, it is desirable to maintain a balanced power output provided by parallel power sources such as PS1 **102** and PS2 **104**. **Figures 2** and **3** illustrate conventional systems for achieving such a balance under varying electrical loads.

As depicted in **FIG. 2**, power supply system **201** includes parallel power supply modules PS1 **202** and PS2 **204** that operate in a "droop" current sharing mode in supplying power to a system load **206**. PS1 **202** and PS2 **204** maintain a required system voltage level, V_{OUT}, at a common output node **215**. Decoupling diodes D1 **212** and D2 **214** serve as decoupling barriers between supply-side nodes **217** and **219** and common output node **215**. In order to achieve the desired operating balance between PS1 **202** and PS2 **204**, the current, I1, through node **217** should be approximately equal to the current, I2, flowing through node **219** (one half of the I_T flowing through common output node **215**).

As further illustrated in **FIG. 2**, power supply system **201** includes circuitry within each of the power supply modules **202** and **204** for maintaining a balance in the relative current load borne by each supply. The technique by which such current sharing is achieved in power supply system **201** is commonly referred to in the art as droop current sharing. As depicted in **FIG. 2**, PS1 **202** and PS2 **204** each include a variable resistor (R1 **220** and R2 **222** respectively) which serves as a setting and adjustment mechanism for the respective output voltages at nodes **217** and **219**. Error amplifiers U1 **224** and U2 **226** are configured as negative feedback devices such that as the current drawn by system load **206** from PS1 **202** and PS2

204 increases, the output voltage level at output node 215 decreases.

The current balancing achieved by the closed-loop voltage "droop" effect relies on very precise and symmetric device mirroring between the individual power supply modules PS1 202 and PS2 204. Such precision is costly and difficult to achieve. Dynamic variations in system load 206 further magnify imbalances between I1 and I2 and result in a wider tolerance required for current imbalance within power supply system 201.

FIG. 3 depicts an alternate closed-loop current sharing technique known in the art as "active current sharing." As illustrated in FIG. 3, power supply system 301 includes a pair of parallel power supply modules PS1 302 and PS2 304 each having a current sense resistor (R1 306 and R2 308). Active current sharing at current sharing feedback node 310 is achieved by utilizing the voltage references developed across R1 306 and R2 308. For example, if the voltage output of PS2 304 at supply-side node 314 is higher than that at supply-side node 312 within PS1 302, the voltage differential across current sense resistors R1 306 and R2 308 indicates that PS2 304 is providing the majority of the current to system load 306.

The imbalance causes the voltage drop across current sense resistor 308 to be higher than the voltage drop across current sense resistor 306. A higher voltage drop across R2 308 results in an increase in the voltage level at current share node 310. This increase in current share node 310 voltage will increase the driving voltages or amplifiers 316 and 317 and will force a higher current to flow through resistor 320 and transistor 318. An increased voltage drop across resistor 320 will result in

a higher voltage at node **312**. This process continues until both the power supplies PS1 **302** and PS2 **304** start current sharing. In this manner, whichever of PS1 **302** or PS2 **304** has a higher voltage becomes the master and the other become a slave.

The load balancing within power supply system 301 thus relies on closed-loop feedback provided between PS1 **302** and PS2 **304** at current sharing feedback node **310**. A varying current through activated transistor **318** or transistor **319** develops an offset voltage across resistors **320** or **321** which causes the output voltage of PS1 **302** or PS2 **304** to increase until both PS1 **302** and PS2 **304** have equal output voltage levels and thus provide equal current to system load **306**.

By providing feedback between each of its constituent power supply modules, the active current sharing system depicted in **FIG. 3** provides a more accurately balanced current load between its respective power supply modules than the droop current sharing system depicted in **FIG. 2**. However, this active sharing method requires expensive overhead components and devices such as very precise and low resistance current sense resistors (R1 **306** and R2 **308**), and low-offset amplifiers (U1 **322** and U2 **324**) within each power supply module. This closed-loop feedback approach relies on interdependencies among parallel power supplies to ensure accurate load balancing. Low tolerance devices, such as amplifiers with very low offsets are required to achieve a reliable interdependence.

It would therefore be desirable to provide an system and method for maintaining an accurate load balance for parallel power supplies without relying on interdependent operating parameters among individual power supply modules.

SUMMARY OF THE INVENTION

A system and method are disclosed for maintaining a balanced current level among multiple power supply modules within a parallel power supply. An external voltage is applied to an internal reference translator circuit within each of the parallel power supply modules, such that an internal current-sharing voltage reference is generated within each power supply module. An external reference translator circuit is biased by an independent voltage level, such that the external reference translator circuit generates an external current-sharing voltage reference that is maintained at a higher voltage level than the internal current-sharing voltage references generated within the parallel power supply modules. The external current-sharing voltage reference acts as a master current share reference with respect to which each of the internal current-sharing voltage references. A current adjustment circuit within each of the power supply modules compares the internal current-sharing voltage reference with the master current share reference and generates a current adjustment signal in response to detecting a voltage differential between the master current share reference and the internal current-sharing voltage reference, such that load-sharing is provided among the parallel power supply modules.

BRIEF DESCRIPTION OF THE DRAWINGS

FIG. 1 is a block diagram depicting a load-sharing parallel power supply system;

FIG. 2 is a schematic diagram illustrating a conventional droop load-sharing parallel power supply;

FIG. 3 is a schematic diagram depicting a conventional active load-sharing parallel power supply; and

FIG. 4 is a schematic diagram illustrating an active load-sharing parallel power supply in accordance with a preferred embodiment of the present invention.

DETAILED DESCRIPTION OF AN ILLUSTRATIVE EMBODIMENT

A current sharing controller system and method are disclosed herein for maintaining a balanced current load within a load sharing parallel power supply. As described in further detail with reference to the figures, the load sharing power supply includes multiple power supply modules, each providing an output current level to the total load current. An external voltage is applied to each of the power supply modules to generate an internal voltage reference level against which a higher voltage master reference is compared in order to achieve load balancing among the parallel power supply modules.

With reference now to **FIG. 4**, there is illustrated a power supply system **400** in accordance with a preferred embodiment of the present invention. As shown in **FIG. 4**, power supply system **400** includes a load-sharing parallel power supply **401**, a master reference translator circuit **407**, and a system load **405**. Included within parallel power supply **401** are power supply modules PS1 **402** and PS2 **404**. A system load bus **412** provides a total load current from PS1 **402** and PS2 **404** to system load **405**.

As illustrated in **FIG. 4**, PS1 **402** and PS2 **404** include slave reference translator circuits **406** and **408** respectively. In accordance with the embodiment depicted in **FIG. 1**, slave reference translator circuits **406** and **408** generate internal voltage references at nodes **441** and **443** within PS1 **402** and PS2 **404** respectively. As shown in **FIG. 4**, slave reference translator circuits **406** and **408** include amplifiers **436** and **438**, decoupling diodes **440** and **442**, representative reference networks **444** and **448**, and **446** and **450**, and a common voltage source (V_{REF}) **432**.

Slave reference translator circuits **406** and **408** are utilized to generate reference outputs for PS1 **402** and PS2 **404** in case the common node reference **413** is not available due to a common fault condition. The dynamic voltage reference at common node **413** is controlled by master reference translator circuit **407**. In the depicted embodiment, master reference translator circuit **407** is located within a power backplane **410** and is thus physically, as well as electrically, independent of any and all parallel power supply modules within load-sharing parallel power supply **401**.

In the illustrated embodiment, master reference translator circuit **407** is similar in its essential construction to slave reference translator circuits **406** and **408**. A master voltage reference **430** is connected to the non-inverting terminal of an operational amplifier (op-amp) **452**, and a negative feedback network connected to its inverting terminal (R2 **456** and R3 **458**) to generate a master reference equal to the output voltage of the power supply. Master reference translator circuit **407** translates an external voltage from external voltage source **430** into a master voltage reference **453**.

In an important feature of the present invention, master voltage reference **453** is maintained at a slightly higher level (tenths of a volt) than the voltage at internal references at nodes **441** and **443**, such master voltage reference **453** (applied across decoupling diode **454**) controls the voltage level at common node **413**. Master voltage reference **453** therefore ensures that master reference translator circuit **407** serves as an independent and controlling reference for parallel power supply modules PS1 **402** and PS2 **404**.

In another important feature of the depicted embodiment, a current sharing controller within parallel power supply **400** includes internal voltage reference nodes **441** and **443** (within slave reference translator circuits **406** and **480** respectively) which are connected in parallel to the independent voltage reference as set by master reference translator circuit **407** at common node **413**. Slave reference translator circuits **406** and **408** may *independently* generate output voltage levels in accordance with independent comparisons of the internal voltage references at nodes **441** and **443** to the independent voltage reference at common node **413**.

The offset tolerance for amplifiers **436** and **438** are not a critical attribute of the load-sharing capability of parallel power supply **400**. The output voltage of the power system is equal to the node voltage **413**, which is generated by a combination of master voltage reference **430**, offset voltage of offset amplifier **452**, and the ratio of the resistance values of R2 **456** and R3 **458**. As common reference **413** acts as a master for all power supplies in parallel, the output voltage of all sources in parallel is equal to this master voltage. The offset in error amplifier **452** and the error ratio of R2 **456** and R3 **458** is applicable to all the sources in parallel.

As illustrated in **FIG. 4**, PS1 **402** and PS2 **404** further include error amplifiers **426** and **428** which regulate pulse- width modulators (PWMs) **414** and **416** in accordance with the voltage level at common node **413**. In this manner the output voltage level applied to system load bus **412** is maintained at a relative constant under varying load conditions.

Similar to the active load-sharing configuration depicted in **FIG. 3**, parallel power supply modules PS1 **402**

and PS2 **404** include sense resistors R1 **418** and R1 **420**. It should be noted, however, that the fine tolerance requirements and linear characteristics required for R1 **306** and R1 **308** are not as critical for R1 **418** and R1 **420**, which are utilized only for overcurrent protection rather than for load-sharing as in **FIG. 3**.

While the invention has been particularly shown as described with reference to a preferred embodiment, it will be understood by those skilled in the art that various changes in form and detail may be made therein without departing from the spirit and scope of the invention. It is therefore contemplated that such modifications can be made without departing from the spirit or scope of the present invention as defined in the appended claims.

CLAIMS:



What is claimed is:

1. A circuit for maintaining a balanced current level among a plurality of power supply modules within a parallel power supply, wherein each of said plurality of power supply modules contribute an output current level to a total load current, and wherein said circuit comprises:

an internal voltage reference within each of said plurality of power supply modules;

an independent voltage reference that is applied to said plurality of power supply modules in parallel at a common node; and

a current adjustment circuit within each of said plurality of power supply modules for comparing said internal voltage reference to said independent voltage reference for generating a current adjustment signal in response to a voltage differential between said independent voltage reference and said internal voltage reference.

2. The circuit of claim 1, wherein said circuit further comprises an independent voltage source for setting and adjusting said independent voltage reference independently of said internal voltage references, wherein said independent voltage source maintains said independent voltage reference at a higher voltage level than said internal voltage references.

3. The circuit of claim 2, wherein said independent voltage source further comprises:

an external voltage source; and

a master reference translator circuit that utilizes said external voltage reference for generating and adjusting said independent voltage reference at a higher voltage level than said internal voltage reference.

4. The circuit of claim 3, wherein each of said current adjustment circuits further comprises a slave reference translator responsive to said independent voltage reference as set by said master reference translator circuit.

5. The current sharing controller of claim 4, wherein said slave reference translator further comprises an error amplifier generating an output voltage adjust signal for adjusting said output voltage level in response to said current adjustment signal, such that each of said power supply modules share an equal balance of said load.

6. A parallel power supply, comprising:

a plurality of parallel power supply modules, wherein each of said plurality of parallel power supply modules contributes an output current level to a common electrical load;

an independent voltage reference;

an internal voltage reference generated within each of said plurality of power supply modules; and

circuit means within each of said plurality of power supply modules for adjusting said output current level in response to detecting a voltage differential between said independent voltage reference and said internal voltage reference.

7. The parallel power supply of claim 6, further comprising a common node at which said independent voltage reference is applied to each of said power supply modules in parallel.

8. The parallel power supply of claim 6, further comprising an external voltage source for generating and adjusting said independent voltage reference.

9. The parallel power supply of claim 8, wherein said external voltage source comprises a master reference translator circuit for maintaining said independent voltage reference higher than said internal voltage references within each of said plurality of power supply modules.

10. The parallel power supply of claim 9, wherein said circuit means for adjusting said output current level includes a slave reference translator circuit within each of said parallel power supply modules for generating said internal voltage reference, in accordance with an external voltage level.

11. The parallel power supply of claim 8, further comprising a barrier device coupled between said external voltage source and said common node such that a failure within said parallel power supply due to a failure within said external voltage source is prevented.

12. A current sharing method for maintaining a balanced current level among a plurality of power supply modules within a parallel power supply, wherein each of said plurality of power supply modules contribute an output current level to a total load current, said current sharing method comprising the steps of:

detecting a voltage output from each of said plurality of power supply modules;

comparing the output voltages of each of said plurality of power supply modules with an independent voltage reference;

detecting a voltage differential between at least one of said output voltages and said independent voltage reference; and

generating a current adjustment signal in response to said detecting step, such that current sharing is provided among said plurality of power supply modules.

13. The current sharing method of claim 12, further comprising the step of setting and adjusting said independent voltage reference independently of said internal voltage references.

14. The current sharing method of claim 13, wherein said setting and adjusting step comprises the step of setting said independent voltage reference at a higher voltage level than said output voltages.