

PLANAR-BEAM, LIGHT DETECTION AND RANGING SYSTEM

CROSS REFERENCE TO RELATED APPLICATIONS

[0001] This application claims the benefit of priority to U.S. Application No. 15/446,953, entitled "PLANAR-BEAM, LIGHT DETECTION AND RANGING SYSTEM," and filed on March 1, 2017, which claims the benefit of priority to U.S. Provisional Application No. 62/303,013, entitled "PLANAR-BEAM, LIGHT DETECTION AND RANGING SYSTEM," and filed on March 3, 2016; the aforementioned applications being hereby incorporated by reference in their respective entireties.

BACKGROUND

[0002] Light detection, and ranging (LIDAR or LADAR) systems utilize a number of laser beams to detect reflectance or backscatter from the laser beams to map surface features or for remote sensing. For typical LIDAR systems, each beam is precisely configured with a dedicated photodetector that detects the reflectance and/or backscatter from that particular beam. As the beam count increases, so do cost and space requirements for the individual lasers and photodetectors.

BRIEF DESCRIPTION OF THE DRAWINGS

[0003] The disclosure herein is illustrated by way of example, and not by way of limitation, in the figures of the accompanying drawings in which like reference numerals refer to similar elements, and in which:

[0004] FIG. 1 is a diagram illustrating an example planar-beam, light detection and ranging (PLADAR) system, as described herein;

[0005] FIG. 2 is a block diagram illustrating an example autonomous vehicle (AV) including a PLADAR system, as described herein;

[0006] FIG. 3 is a flow chart describing an example method of processing PLADAR data, according to one or more examples described herein;

[0007] FIGS. 4A and 4B are a flow chart describing example methods of configuring a PLADAR system, as described herein; and

[0008] FIG. 5 is a block diagram illustrating an example computing system upon which examples described herein may be implemented.

DETAILED DESCRIPTION

[0009] Current LIDAR technology involves fixed-beam LIDAR systems that include laser sources, scanners, optical systems (e.g., beam splitters and/or collimators), and photodetectors. For example, cutting edge LIDAR systems can include pulse rates on the order of one million pulses per second producing a detailed point cloud map of an autonomous vehicle's surroundings at ranges upwards of one hundred-plus meters. These LIDAR systems require precision pulse sequencing for the laser beams for multiple reasons, such as power constraints, sampling and/or processing constraints, and the like. When using typical LIDAR systems for autonomous vehicles traveling on public roads, operational speed may be limited by the nature of the beam pattern produced by the LIDAR system. For example, in order to ensure safety for an autonomous vehicle traveling at low speeds over public roads, a LIDAR system may require several separate beams to readily detect potential hazards with sufficient granularity to decelerate, maneuver, and/or stop the autonomous vehicle accordingly. When the autonomous vehicle travels at high speeds (e.g., 60 mph, 75 mph, etc.), in order to achieve the same granularity for potential hazards in order to safely react, decelerate, and/or stop the autonomous vehicle, a fixed-beam LIDAR system may require well over seventy separate beams.

[0010] Increasing the number of fixed beams places additional requirements for a LIDAR system. For example, the LIDAR system will require more power, greater processing capability, larger or more sensitive photodetector and receiving equipment, constrained optics, and generally greater weight and more space. Furthermore, cost and waste quickly become an issue when increasing the number of fixed-beams, since the beam pattern for the fixed-beam LIDAR system must be tuned for a maximum operational speed of the autonomous vehicle. If autonomous vehicles are to operate safely with LIDAR technology on public highways at high speed, then alternative arrangements may be necessary to avoid spiraling costs, wasted power, additional equipment, and increased processing requirements.

[0011] To address many of the shortcomings of fixed-beam LIDAR systems, a planar-beam, light detection and ranging (PLADAR) system is provided. The PLADAR system can include a laser scanner that emits a planar-beam, and a detector array to detect reflected light (e.g., backscatter)

from the planar beam. In some aspects, the laser scanner can include a collimation component that collimates a laser beam generated by the laser scanner into the planar beam. The laser scanner can utilize a single laser collimated on an axis (e.g., a vertical axis) to generate the planar beam, which can extend from the laser scanner approximately triangularly as opposed to linearly. According to certain implementations, the laser scanner can include a fiber laser that generates the laser beam for axial collimation. Fiber lasers can offer vibrational stability, ideal optical quality, and compact size in addition to other desirable qualities. However, virtually any type of laser with appropriate emission characteristics may be used, such as certain types of gas lasers, excimer lasers, dye lasers, other forms of solid state lasers, semi-conductor based lasers, metal vapor lasers, etc. utilizing continuous wave or pulsed emissions. For autonomous vehicle applications, wavelengths on the order of 1000 nanometers (nm) (e.g., 1200–1550 nm) corresponding to the near-infrared spectral range may be optimal for health and safety reasons.

[0012] In many examples, the detector array of the PLADAR system can include at least one set of photodetectors, such as one or more linear rows of photodetectors, which can be included on a circuit board of the PLADAR system. The circuit board can include a number of adjustment components for the photodetector array(s) to calibrate the photodetectors in concert. In some aspects, the PLADAR system can further include an adjustment controller to dynamically adjust the adjustment components to optimally configure the row(s) of photodetectors in response to a command signal. The command signal may be generated by a calibration system pre-implementation, or dynamically when the PLADAR system is in use. Additionally or alternatively, the adjustment components can be tuned manually by a user or technician when calibrating the photodetector array to the planar beam.

[0013] Accordingly to examples described herein, the PLADAR system can be implemented on an autonomous vehicle to provide sensor data to an on-board data processing system of the autonomous vehicle. The PLADAR system can include an analog-to-digital converter (ADC) chain coupled to the photodetector array. In certain implementations, the ADC chain can generate output from all of the photodetectors simultaneously, and the

outputted data can be processed (e.g., by the on-board data processing system of the autonomous vehicle) accordingly. In such implementations, the pulse rate of the planar beam can be significantly reduced compared to fixed-beam LIDAR systems. For example, when fine granularity is desired, instead of transmitting one hundred or so beams (e.g., with $\sim 0.15^\circ$ beam spacing), examples described herein can transmit a single (or multiple) beam planes with the same or similar data quality at $\sim 1/100$ th the pulse rate.

[0014] Among other benefits, the examples described herein achieve a technical effect of providing an alternative to increasingly expensive, complex, and tediously calibrated LIDAR systems. A PLADAR system can maintain or increase data quality while reducing cost and complexity, which are increasing concerns in autonomous vehicle technology and currently function as hindrances in the rollout of autonomous vehicles for common use.

[0015] As used herein, a PLADAR system implements remote sensing using planar beams as opposed to linear beams. "PLADAR" is used herein to represent any light detection and ranging system that uses two-dimensional beam planes for remote sensing.

[0016] As used herein, a computing device refer to devices corresponding to desktop computers, cellular devices or smartphones, personal digital assistants (PDAs), field programmable gate arrays (FPGAs), laptop computers, tablet devices, television (IP Television), etc., that can provide network connectivity and processing resources for communicating with the system over a network. A computing device can also correspond to custom hardware, in-vehicle devices, or on-board computers, etc. The computing device can also operate a designated application configured to communicate with the network service.

[0017] One or more examples described herein provide that methods, techniques, and actions performed by a computing device are performed programmatically, or as a computer-implemented method. Programmatically, as used herein, means through the use of code or computer-executable instructions. These instructions can be stored in one or more memory resources of the computing device. A programmatically performed step may or may not be automatic.

[0018] One or more examples described herein can be implemented using programmatic modules, engines, or components. A programmatic module,

engine, or component can include a program, a sub-routine, a portion of a program, or a software component or a hardware component capable of performing one or more stated tasks or functions. As used herein, a module or component can exist on a hardware component independently of other modules or components. Alternatively, a module or component can be a shared element or process of other modules, programs or machines.

[0019] Some examples described herein can generally require the use of computing devices, including processing and memory resources. For example, one or more examples described herein may be implemented, in whole or in part, on computing devices such as servers, desktop computers, cellular or smartphones, personal digital assistants (e.g., PDAs), laptop computers, printers, digital picture frames, network equipment (e.g., routers) and tablet devices. Memory, processing, and network resources may all be used in connection with the establishment, use, or performance of any example described herein (including with the performance of any method or with the implementation of any system).

[0020] Furthermore, one or more examples described herein may be implemented through the use of instructions that are executable by one or more processors. These instructions may be carried on a computer-readable medium. Machines shown or described with figures below provide examples of processing resources and computer-readable mediums on which instructions for implementing examples disclosed herein can be carried and/or executed. In particular, the numerous machines shown with examples of the invention include processor(s) and various forms of memory for holding data and instructions. Examples of computer-readable mediums include permanent memory storage devices, such as hard drives on personal computers or servers. Other examples of computer storage mediums include portable storage units, such as CD or DVD units, flash memory (such as carried on smartphones, multifunctional devices or tablets), and magnetic memory. Computers, terminals, network enabled devices (e.g., mobile devices, such as cell phones) are all examples of machines and devices that utilize processors, memory, and instructions stored on computer-readable mediums. Additionally, examples may be implemented in the form of computer-programs, or a computer usable carrier medium capable of carrying such a program.

[0021] SYSTEM DESCRIPTION

[0022] FIG. 1 is a block diagram illustrating an example planar-beam, light detection and ranging (PLADAR) system, as described herein. The PLADAR system 100 can include a PLADAR scanner and optics 114 that generate a two-dimensional beam plane 118. The scanner/optics 114 can include a single laser source (or multiple laser sources) that generates a laser beam. In certain aspects, the laser source of the beam plane 118 can be a fiber laser emitting in the near to mid infrared spectral range. The optics of the scanner/optics 114 can include a number mirrors and/or a collimation component that collimates the laser beam axially to form the beam plane 118. The collimation component can include a number of lenses, spatial filters, mirrors, fiber optics, and/or gratings, which can filter, amplify, and/or narrow a resultant planar beam 118. Accordingly, the collimation component of the scanner/optics 114 collimates the laser beam on a single axis to generate the beam plane 118.

[0023] In many aspects, the PLADAR system 100 can include a photodetector array 119 including a number of individual photodetectors. According to examples described herein, the photodetector array 119 can comprise a linear arrangement (e.g., as a one or more linear rows of photodetectors) to correlate with the beam plane 118 emitted by the PLADAR system 100. For example, the individual photodetectors can be included and calibrated on a circuit board to be aligned with the beam plane 118. Furthermore, the photodetector array 119 can include a number of adjustable components 123 (e.g., calibration screws) that can allow for straightforward calibration of the photodetector array 119 with the beam plane 118. In some aspects, the photodetector array 119 can include a sufficient number of individual photodetectors (e.g., tens to hundreds) for generating sensor data with sufficient granularity to detect any possible road hazards (e.g., objects with size on the order of feet or inches) for operating an autonomous vehicle on public roads. In such aspects, the photodetector array 119 can include as many or more photodetectors as current or future state of the art fixed-beam LIDAR systems.

[0024] In various implementations, the photodetector array 119 can include multiple linear arrangements of photodetectors, and/or interleaved detectors across the multiple linear arrangements. For example, the

photodetector array 119 can include two or more lines of photodetectors to take advantage of the beam spread of the beam plane 118. In variations, the nature of the beam plane 118 can allow for any suitable arrangement for the photodetector array 119, such as separate staggered photodetector lines of varying lengths, a wider central arrangement, a narrower central arrangement, and the like. Thus, in addition to a single linear row of photodetectors, the photodetector array can include a plurality of photodetector rows aligned in a manner corresponding to the beam plane 118.

[0025] The photodetector array 119 detects reflection and/or backscatter 126 from the beam plane 118, and a timing component 135 is utilized to perform ranging operations for the PLADAR system 100. Accordingly, the PLADAR system 100 actively transmits the beam plane 118, light from the beam plane 118 is reflected off objects and surfaces, and this reflection/backscatter 126 is detected by the individual receivers of the photodetector array 119. Data from the detected light is precisely timed to perform the ranging operations (e.g., dynamic calculations of distance to each surface) and generate a dynamic point cloud map of the situational environment of the PLADAR system 100.

[0026] Furthermore, LIDAR systems sequence the individual beams and detectors in order to decrease power and processing loads, which can constrain data quality. The PLADAR system 100 can utilize a single beam plane 118 at a single pulse rate, which may be increased or decreased accordingly depending on the situational environment (e.g., a crowded city environment, a rural road with little or no traffic, etc.). In certain aspects, PLADAR sensor data 129 from the photodetectors of the photodetector array 119 may be sampled simultaneously from all photodetectors by a local or external data processor 130. Thus, in some implementations, the data processor 130 can be included as a component of the PLADAR system 100. In other implementations, the data processor 130 may be remote, and/or can be included as a part of, for example, an on-board data processing system of an autonomous vehicle.

[0027] Each detector of the photodetector array 119 can include an analog-to-digital converter (ADC), which converts the detected light signal from the reflection/backscatter 126 of the beam plane 118 into a digital

signal for processing. Accordingly, in many examples, the photodetector array 119 can include an ADC chain, similar to certain LIDAR systems. The combined data from the ADC chain (i.e., PLADAR sensor data 129) can be sampled by the data processor 130 (e.g., simultaneously or near-simultaneously for each pulse) to generate the point cloud map of the situational environment. Feedback 132 can be provided by the data processor 130 to a PLADAR controller 150, or adjustment controller, which can make adjustments to the configurable parameters of the PLADAR system 100.

[0028] According to examples described herein, the individual detectors of the photodetector array 119 can be adjusted in concert using the adjustable components 123. In certain examples, the photodetector array 119 can be pre-calibrated and aligned with the beam plane 118 during the manufacturing process. Additionally or alternatively, when a misalignment is detected (e.g., by the data processor 130), the photodetector array 119 may be manually calibrated during servicing. Additionally or alternatively still, the feedback 132 provided by the data processor 130 can indicate the misalignment, and can be processed by the PLADAR controller 150. The PLADAR controller 150 can determine a number of adjustments based on the feedback 132, and can utilize the adjustable components 123 to re-calibrate the photodetector array 119 automatically and on the fly.

[0029] In certain aspects, the PLADAR controller 150 can further operate the PLADAR motor 120, which can, for example, control a rotational rate of the PLADAR system 100. The PLADAR controller can further control the timing component 135 and the PLADAR scanner/optics 114 to increase or decrease the pulse rate when, for example, finer granularity in the generated point cloud is needed (e.g., in pedestrian rich environments). Generally, however, the pulse rate of the beam plane 118 can be far less (e.g., 100x less) than those of typical LIDAR systems, since the PLADAR system 100 utilizes a single light source.

[0030] Other arrangements are contemplated. For example, the PLADAR scanner/optics 114 can generate the beam plane 118 along with one or more linear beams having dedicated detectors. As another example, the PLADAR scanner/optics 114 can generate multiple beam planes 118. The embodiment illustrated in FIG. 1 shows a rotational PLADAR system 100

operated by a PLADAR motor 120. However, example PLADAR systems 100 described herein can include a scanning motor that uses a beam plane 118 to scan a certain directional aspect (e.g., directly in front of an autonomous vehicle). Further, the beam plane 118 is axially collimated on a single axis, and can be collimated vertically, horizontally, in a slanted manner (as shown), and can provide almost any desired vertical field of view (e.g., a 45° VFOV at 25 meters).

[0031] FIG. 2 is a block diagram illustrating an example autonomous vehicle including a PLADAR system, as described herein. The PLADAR system 205 of the autonomous vehicle (AV) 200 can provide PLADAR data 202 to an on-board data processing system 210 of the autonomous vehicle 200. In some examples, the PLADAR system 205 can comprise a light source (e.g., a laser), a photodetector, scanner components (e.g., which can include one or more lens(es), mirror(s), motor(s), actuator(s), etc.), and circuitry to couple to various components of the autonomous vehicle 200. The data processing system 210 can utilize the PLADAR data 202 to detect the situational conditions of the autonomous vehicle 200 as the AV 100 travels along a current route. For example, the data processing system 210 can identify potential obstacles or road hazards—such as pedestrians, bicyclists, objects on the road, road cones, road signs, animals, etc.—in order to enable an AV control system 220 to react accordingly.

[0032] In certain implementations, the data processing system 210 can utilize sub-maps 233 stored in a database 230 of the autonomous vehicle 200 in order to perform localization and pose operations to determine a current location and orientation of the autonomous vehicle 200 in relation to a given region (e.g., a city). The sub-maps 233 can comprise previously recorded sensor data, such as stereo camera data, radar maps, and/or point cloud LIDAR maps that enable the data processing system 210 to compare the PLADAR data 202 from the PLADAR system 205 with a current sub-map 234 to identify such obstacles and potential road hazards in real time. The data processing system 210 can provide the processed sensor data 213—identifying such obstacles and road hazards—to AV control system 220, which can react accordingly by operating the steering, braking, and acceleration systems 225 of the autonomous vehicle 200.

[0033] In some examples, the autonomous vehicle 200 further includes a number of stereo cameras 260 that generate dynamic image data 262 of the autonomous vehicle's 200 surroundings. For example, the autonomous vehicle 200 can include stereo cameras 260 with fields of view showing a 360° panorama (or forward and rearward directions) of the autonomous vehicle 200. The on-board data processing system 210 can further process the dynamic image data 262 to identify features or potential hazards along the current route traveled. The processed data 213 can include processed image data from the stereo cameras 260, which can be utilized by the AV control system 220 to perform low level maneuvering.

[0034] In many implementations, the AV control system 220 can receive a destination 219 from, for example, an interface system 215 of the autonomous vehicle 200. The interface system 215 can include any number of touch-screens, voice sensors, mapping resources, etc. that enable a passenger 239 to provide a passenger input 241 indicating the destination 219. For example, the passenger 239 can type the destination 219 into a mapping engine 275 of the autonomous vehicle 200, or can speak the destination 219 into the interface system 215. Additionally or alternatively, the interface system 215 can include a wireless communication module that can connect the autonomous vehicle 200 to a network 280 to communicate with a backend transport arrangement system 290 to receive invitations 282 to service a pick-up or drop-off request. Such invitations 282 can include destination 219 (e.g., a pick-up location), and can be received by the autonomous vehicle 200 as a communication over the network 280 from the backend transport arrangement system 290. In many aspects, the backend transport arrangement system 290 can manage routes and/or facilitate transportation for users using a fleet of autonomous vehicles throughout a given region. The backend transport arrangement system 290 can be operative to facilitate passenger pick-ups and drop-offs to generally service pick-up requests, facilitate delivery such as packages, food, or animals, and the like.

[0035] Based on the destination 219 (e.g., a pick-up location), the AV control system 220 can utilize the mapping engine 275 to receive route data 232 indicating a route to the destination 219. In variations, the mapping engine 275 can also generate map content 226 dynamically indicating the

route traveled to the destination 219. The route data 232 and/or map content 226 can be utilized by the AV control system 220 to maneuver the autonomous vehicle 200 to the destination 219 along the selected route. For example, the AV control system 220 can dynamically generate control commands 221 for the autonomous vehicle's steering, braking, and acceleration system 225 to actively drive the autonomous vehicle 200 to the destination 219 along the selected route. Optionally, the map content 226 showing the current route traveled can be streamed to the interior interface system 215 so that the passenger(s) 239 can view the route and route progress in real time.

[0036] In many examples, while the AV control system 220 operates the steering, braking, and acceleration systems 225 along the current route on a high level, and the processed data 213 provided to the AV control system 220 can indicate low level occurrences, such as obstacles and potential hazards to which the AV control system 220 can make decisions and react. For example, the processed data 213 can indicate a pedestrian crossing the road, traffic signals, stop signs, other vehicles, road conditions, traffic conditions, bicycle lanes, crosswalks, pedestrian activity (e.g., a crowded adjacent sidewalk), and the like. The AV control system 220 can respond to the processed data 213 by generating control commands 221 to reactively operate the steering, braking, and acceleration systems 225 accordingly.

[0037] According to examples described herein, the autonomous vehicle 200 can include a PLADAR controller 235 to receive feedback data 223 from the data processing system 210 in order to configure various adjustable parameters of the PLADAR system 205. The feedback data 223 can include information indicating data quality, such as errors or uncertainty in the data from certain individual photodetectors, which can be extrapolated by the PLADAR controller 235 to determine a number of adjustment commands 237 for the PLADAR system 205 that can correct the error(s). For example, the PLADAR controller 235 can identify a pattern in the feedback data 223 indicating a misalignment of the photodetector array with respect to the PLADAR beam 207. The PLADAR controller 235 can identify the misalignment and generate the adjustment commands 237 for execution on the adjustable components of the photodetector array to re-calibrate the PLADAR system 205. As discussed herein, the adjustment commands 237 can be executed

on the adjustable components dynamically as the autonomous vehicle 200 travels along a current route, or during garage servicing of the autonomous vehicle 200.

[0038] Additionally or alternatively, the feedback data 223 can include requests from the data processing system 210 for the PLADAR controller 235 to configure the PLADAR system 205 for increased or decreased granularity. For example, the data processing system 210 can identify a substantial decrease in potential hazards (e.g., when the autonomous vehicle 200 leaves a city and enters open rural road with little traffic). The feedback data 223 can include a request to save power in such conditions by decreasing the pulse rate and/or scan rate of the PLADAR system 205. Accordingly, in some aspects, the adjustment commands 237 can be generated by the PLADAR controller 235 to adjust a rotational parameter 209 (e.g., decrease a rotational rate) and/or decrease the pulse rate of the PLADAR beam 207—thereby enabling a decrease in sample rate by the data processing system 210.

[0039] Conversely, the on-board data processing system 210 can identify an increase in potential hazards (e.g., entering an area of increased pedestrian activity) or an increased probability of experiencing hazards (e.g., when traveling at high speeds), and request that the PLADAR controller 235 generate adjustment commands 237 to increase the sample rate. Such commands 237 can be executed on the adjustable parameters of the PLADAR system 205 to increase a pulse rate of the PLADAR beam 207 and/or increase the rotational rate—thereby enabling the data processing system 210 to increase the sample rate and bolster point cloud granularity.

[0040] METHODOLOGY

[0041] FIG. 3 is a flow chart describing an example method of processing PLADAR data, according to one or more examples described herein. In the below description of FIG. 3, reference may be made to like features represented by reference characters from FIGS. 1 and 2. Furthermore, the method described with respect to FIG. 3 may be performed by an example data processor 130 shown and described with respect to FIG. 1, or an on-board data processing system 230 shown and described with respect to FIG. 2. Referring to FIG. 3, the data processor 130 can sample data from each detector of the PLADAR system 100 simultaneously (300). For example, the

data processor 130 can monitor each ADC of an ADC chain coupled to the photodetector array 119. For each beam plane 118 pulse, return light signals (e.g., reflection/backscatter 126) can be received by the photodetector array 119. Each detector can include an ADC that converts the detected light signal into a digital signal, and a timing component 135 can be utilized by the data processor 130 to precisely perform ranging for each ADC of the ADC chain and for every beam plane 118 pulse.

[0042] The data processor 130 (e.g., of an autonomous vehicle 200) can process the PLADAR data 129 to perform ranging and identify potential hazards (305). For example, the data processor 130 can be programmed to identify aspects of the autonomous vehicle's situational environment that causes the autonomous vehicle 200 to operate safely on public roads. Such aspects can include pedestrians, bicyclists, hazardous objects on the road (e.g., rocks), stop lights, signs, other vehicles, and the like. The processor 130 can identify such aspects by, for example, comparing the PLADAR data 129 to a stored sub-map including prerecorded data on the same current route, as described with respect to FIG. 2. In many implementations, the data processor 130 transmits the processed sensor data 213 to an AV control system 220, which can control the autonomous vehicle's 200 steering, braking, and acceleration systems 225 to make decisions and react to each processed object for low level maneuvering (310). Additionally, the AV control system 220 can further utilize dynamic image data 262 from a stereo camera system 260 of the autonomous vehicle 200 for low level maneuvering.

[0043] In certain implementations, the data processor 130 can identify, in the PLADAR data 129, a misalignment between the photodetector array 119 and the beam plane 118 (315). As an example, the PLADAR data 129 can indicate unreliable data for the top detectors and the bottom detectors, which can indicate a diagonal misalignment of the photodetector array 118. In some aspects, the data processor 130 can determine the nature of the misalignment based on the sampled PLADAR data 129. In other aspects, the data processor 130 can generally identify the error in the data, and generate feedback 132 requesting the PLADAR controller 150 to perform a diagnostics test. In either aspect, the data processor 130 can generate feedback 132 indicating the misalignment (320), and transmit the feedback to the PLADAR

controller 150 to re-calibrate the photodetector array 119 to the planar beam 118 (325).

[0044] According to some examples, the data processor 130 can determine a condition change in the situational environment of the autonomous vehicle 200 (330). As an example, the data processor 130 can identify that the autonomous vehicle 200 is traveling at higher speeds, and that more detailed data from a forward direction of the autonomous vehicle 200 is desired. The data processor 130 can generate a request to adjust the PLADAR system 100 configurations to, for example, increase a pulse rate, scan rate, detector sensitivity, and/or a laser intensity to increase the data quality (335). Conversely, to optimize power and processing resources, in certain circumstances (e.g., low speed operation), the data processor 130 can generate a request to decrease such configurable parameters when situational conditions are conducive to such decreases (335). These requests can be transmitted to the PLADAR controller 150 (340), which can execute adjustment commands 237 on the configurable components of the PLADAR system 100 accordingly.

[0045] FIGS. 4A and 4B are a flow chart describing example methods of configuring a PLADAR system, as described herein. In the below description of FIGS. 4A and 4B, reference may be made to like features represented by reference characters from FIGS. 1 and 2. Furthermore, the methods described with respect to FIGS. 4A and 4B may be performed by an example PLADAR controller 150, 235 shown and described with respect to FIGS. 1 and 2. Referring to FIG. 4A, the PLADAR controller 150 can receive feedback 132 from the data processor 130 indicating a misalignment (400). In some examples, the feedback 132 identifies the specific misalignment (e.g., leftward, rightward, topward, downward, clockwise or counterclockwise diagonal misalignments or any combination of the foregoing).

[0046] In other examples, the feedback 132 can include samplings of the PLADAR data 129, which the PLADAR controller 150 can analyze to identify a data pattern that describes or details the misalignment (405). For example, data from the photodetector array 119 can indicate a consistent pattern of bad or unreliable data from any number of individual detectors in the array 119. In some situations, the PLADAR controller 150 can perform an initial set of adjustments on the adjustable components 123 to diagnose the

misalignment. In other situations, the misalignment may be readily identified by the PLADAR controller 150, and the calibration can be made directly.

Accordingly, once the precise misalignment is identified, the PLADAR controller 150 can generate and execute adjustment commands 237 on the adjustable components 123 of the photodetector array 119 to realign or recalibrate the photodetector array 119 to the beam plane 118 (410).

[0047] Referring to FIG. 4B, the PLADAR controller 150 can receive a request from the data processor 130 to adjust PLADAR system 100 configurations (450). For example, based on changing situational conditions (e.g., changing weather such as rain or snow, changing speed, changing environmental complexity or potential hazard count, etc.), the data processor 130 can determine that an increased or decreased pulse rate (451) and/or scan rate (452) is preferable. Additionally or alternatively, the data processor 130 may determine that conditions require an increase in laser intensity (453) to enhance reflectance, or an increase in detector sensitivity (454). Alternatively, the data processor 130 may determine that conditions are conducive to power savings (e.g., in low speed uncrowded situations), and may request to decrease such configurations.

[0048] In any case, the PLADAR controller 150 can generate adjustment commands 237 based on the requests from the data processor 130 (455). The PLADAR controller 150 can then execute the adjustment commands 237 on the relevant components of the PLADAR system 100 to configure the PLADAR system 100 accordingly (460). For example, the PLADAR controller 150 can execute commands 237 on the PLADAR motor 120 to increase or decrease the scan rate (461). As another example, the PLADAR controller 150 can execute commands 237 on the timing component 135 to increase or decrease a pulse rate of the laser (462). Further, the PLADAR controller 150 can execute commands 237 on the laser source itself to increase or decrease laser intensity (e.g., increase or decrease power or beam frequency) (463). Still further, in some implementations, the PLADAR controller 150 can execute commands 237 on the detector array 119 to increase or decrease detector sensitivity (464).

[0049] While the data processor 130 and PLADAR controller 150 are shown as separate components in FIGS. 1 and 2, it is contemplated that certain embodiments can include a single component (e.g., one or more

blade computers of an autonomous vehicle 200 that perform all of the operations described with respect to FIG. 3 and FIGS. 4A and 4B.

[0050] HARDWARE DIAGRAM

[0051] FIG. 5 is a block diagram that illustrates a computer system upon which examples described herein may be implemented. A computer system 500 can be implemented on, for example, a server or combination of servers. For example, the computer system 500 may be implemented as part of a data processing system 130, which itself may be implemented as a part of the AV's on-board data processing system 210. In the context of FIG. 1, the data processing system 130 may be implemented with the PLADAR controller 150 as a single computer system 500, or using a combination of multiple computer systems as described in connection with FIG. 5.

[0052] In one implementation, the computer system 500 includes processing resources 510, a main memory 520, a read-only memory (ROM) 530, a storage device 540, and a communication interface 550. The computer system 500 includes at least one processor 510 for processing information stored in the main memory 520, such as provided by a random access memory (RAM) or other dynamic storage device, for storing information and instructions which are executable by the processor 510. The main memory 520 also may be used for storing temporary variables or other intermediate information during execution of instructions to be executed by the processor 510. The computer system 500 may also include the ROM 530 or other static storage device for storing static information and instructions for the processor 510. A storage device 540, such as a magnetic disk or optical disk, is provided for storing information and instructions.

[0053] The communication interface 550 enables the computer system 500 to communicate with the PLADAR system 580 over a network link (e.g., a wireless or wired link). In accordance with examples, the computer system 500 receives PLADAR data 582 from the PLADAR system 580. The executable instructions stored in the memory 530 can include configuration instructions 522, which the processor 510 executes to generate a set of adjustment commands 554 to configure the adjustable parameters of the autonomous vehicle's PLADAR system 580 based on the PLADAR data 582 and the situational conditions of the autonomous vehicle 200.

[0054] The processor 510 is configured with software and/or other logic to perform one or more processes, steps and other functions described with implementations, such as described by FIGS. 1 through 4B, and elsewhere in the present application.

[0055] Examples described herein are related to the use of the computer system 500 for implementing the techniques described herein. According to one example, those techniques are performed by the computer system 500 in response to the processor 510 executing one or more sequences of one or more instructions contained in the main memory 520. Such instructions may be read into the main memory 520 from another machine-readable medium, such as the storage device 540. Execution of the sequences of instructions contained in the main memory 520 causes the processor 510 to perform the process steps described herein. In alternative implementations, hard-wired circuitry may be used in place of or in combination with software instructions to implement examples described herein. Thus, the examples described are not limited to any specific combination of hardware circuitry and software.

[0056] It is contemplated for examples described herein to extend to individual elements and concepts described herein, independently of other concepts, ideas or system, as well as for examples to include combinations of elements recited anywhere in this application. Although examples are described in detail herein with reference to the accompanying drawings, it is to be understood that the concepts are not limited to those precise examples. As such, many modifications and variations will be apparent to practitioners skilled in this art. Accordingly, it is intended that the scope of the concepts be defined by the following claims and their equivalents. Furthermore, it is contemplated that a particular feature described either individually or as part of an example can be combined with other individually described features, or parts of other examples, even if the other features and examples make no mention of the particular feature. Thus, the absence of describing combinations should not preclude claiming rights to such combinations.

What is claimed is:

1. A planar-beam, light detection and ranging (PLADAR) system, the PLADAR system comprising:
 - a laser scanner emitting a planar beam;
 - a detector array to detect reflected light based on the planar beam being reflected from external surfaces of target objects; and
 - an adjustment controller;wherein the detector array comprises at least one row of photodetectors included on a circuit board of the PLADAR system, the circuit board comprising a number of adjustment components to calibrate each of the at least one row of photodetectors; and
 - wherein the adjustment controller dynamically adjusts the adjustment components to configure the at least one row of photodetectors in response to a command signal from a data processing system.
2. The PLADAR system of claim 1, wherein the laser scanner comprises a collimation component that collimates a laser beam generated by the laser scanner into the planar beam.
3. The PLADAR system of claim 2, wherein the laser scanner comprises a fiber laser that outputs the laser beam.
4. The PLADAR system of claim 1, wherein the PLADAR system is included on an autonomous vehicle (AV), and wherein the data processing system processes sensor data from the PLADAR system to dynamically identify features as the AV accelerates and maneuvers.

5. The PLADAR system of claim 1, further comprising:
an analog to digital converter (ADC) chain coupled to the at least one row of photodetectors;

wherein the data processing system samples data from each ADC of the ADC chain simultaneously.

6. An autonomous vehicle (AV) comprising:
at least one planar-beam, light detection and ranging (PLADAR) system to generate sensor data indicating a situational environment of the AV, each of the at least one PLADAR system comprising (i) a laser scanner emitting a planar beam, and (ii) a detector array to detect reflected light based on the planar beam being reflected from external surfaces;

an on-board data processing system to process the sensor data from the PLADAR system to identify features along a current route traveled by the AV;

an acceleration, braking, and steering system; and

an AV control system to utilize the processed sensor data to operate the acceleration, braking, and steering system along the current route.

7. The AV of claim 6, wherein the laser scanner comprises a collimation component that collimates a laser beam generated by the laser scanner into the planar beam.

8. The AV of claim 7, wherein the laser scanner comprises a fiber laser that outputs the laser beam.

9. The AV of claim 6, wherein the detector array comprises at least one row of photodetectors.

10. The AV of claim 9, wherein the at least one row of photodetectors are included on a circuit board of the PLADAR system, the circuit board comprising a number of adjustment components to calibrate each of the at least one row of photodetectors in concert.

11. The AV of claim 10, wherein the PLADAR system further includes an adjustment controller to dynamically adjust the adjustment components to configure the at least one row of photodetectors in response to a command signal from the on-board data processing system.

12. The AV of claim 9, wherein the PLADAR system further include an analog to digital converter (ADC) chain coupled to the at least one row of photodetectors, and wherein the on-board data processing system processes data from each ADC of the ADC chain simultaneously.

13. The AV of claim 9, further comprising:
a stereo camera system to generate dynamic image data further indicating the situational environment of the AV;
wherein the on-board data processing system further processes the dynamic image data to further identify features along the current route traveled by the AV.

14. The AV of claim 13, wherein the AV control system further utilizes the processed dynamic image data to operate the acceleration, braking, and steering system along the current route.

15. The AV of claim 14, further comprising:

a communication interface to receive commands from a backend transport system that facilitates transportation for a number of users throughout a given region, each respective one of the commands including a destination;

wherein the AV control system processes the respective command to operate the acceleration, braking, and steering system to drive the AV to the destination.

16. The AV of claim 15, wherein the AV control system utilizes an on-board mapping resource to determine an optimal route to the destination.

17. The AV of claim 16, wherein the AV control system simultaneously operates the acceleration, braking, and steering system by (i) utilizing route data, corresponding to the optimal route to the destination, to drive the AV to the destination, and (ii) utilizing the processed sensor data and the processed dynamic image data to make decisions and react to the situational environment of the AV.

18. A planar-beam, light detection and ranging (PLADAR) system, the PLADAR system comprising:

a laser scanner emitting a planar beam; and

a detector array to detect reflected light based on the planar beam being reflected from external surfaces;

wherein the PLADAR system is included on an autonomous vehicle (AV) and enables a data processing system of the AV to process sensor data from the PLADAR system to dynamically identify features as the AV operates along a route.