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(54) **METHOD AND APPARATUS FOR VEHICLE SERVICE SYSTEM OPTICAL TARGET ASSEMBLY**

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G01B 11/275 (2006.01)

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(52) **U.S. Cl.** **33/203.18**; 33/288; 356/139.09

(58) **Field of Classification Search** 33/203,
33/203.18, 203.19, 203.2, 288; 356/139.08,
356/155, 620

See application file for complete search history.

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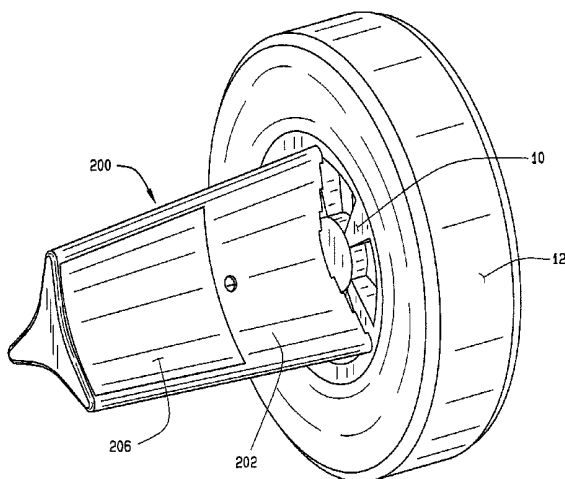
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(57) **ABSTRACT**

A method and apparatus for determining the alignment of a vehicle wheel using an optical target attached to the vehicle wheel, the optical target having a dimensionally stable shape and a plurality of target elements arranged in a known geometric and spatial configuration relative to each other. A two-dimensional image of the optical target is acquired by an imaging system to detect a plurality of target element images corresponding to the plurality of target elements arranged on the optical target. A spatial orientation of the optical target and an alignment of the vehicle wheel is then determined from the plurality of target element images and the known geometric and spatial configuration of the plurality of target elements on the optical target.

18 Claims, 9 Drawing Sheets



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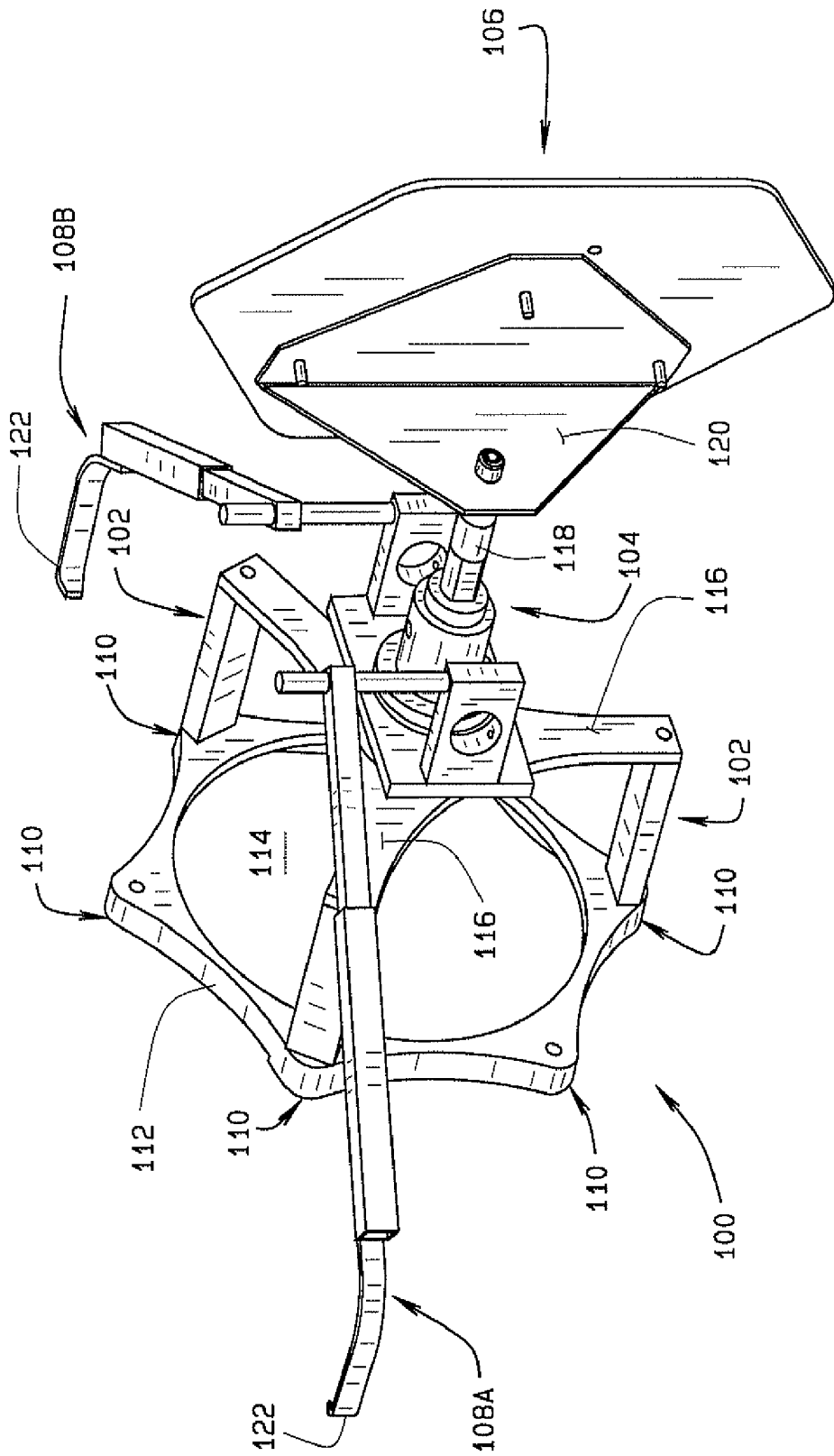


FIG. 1

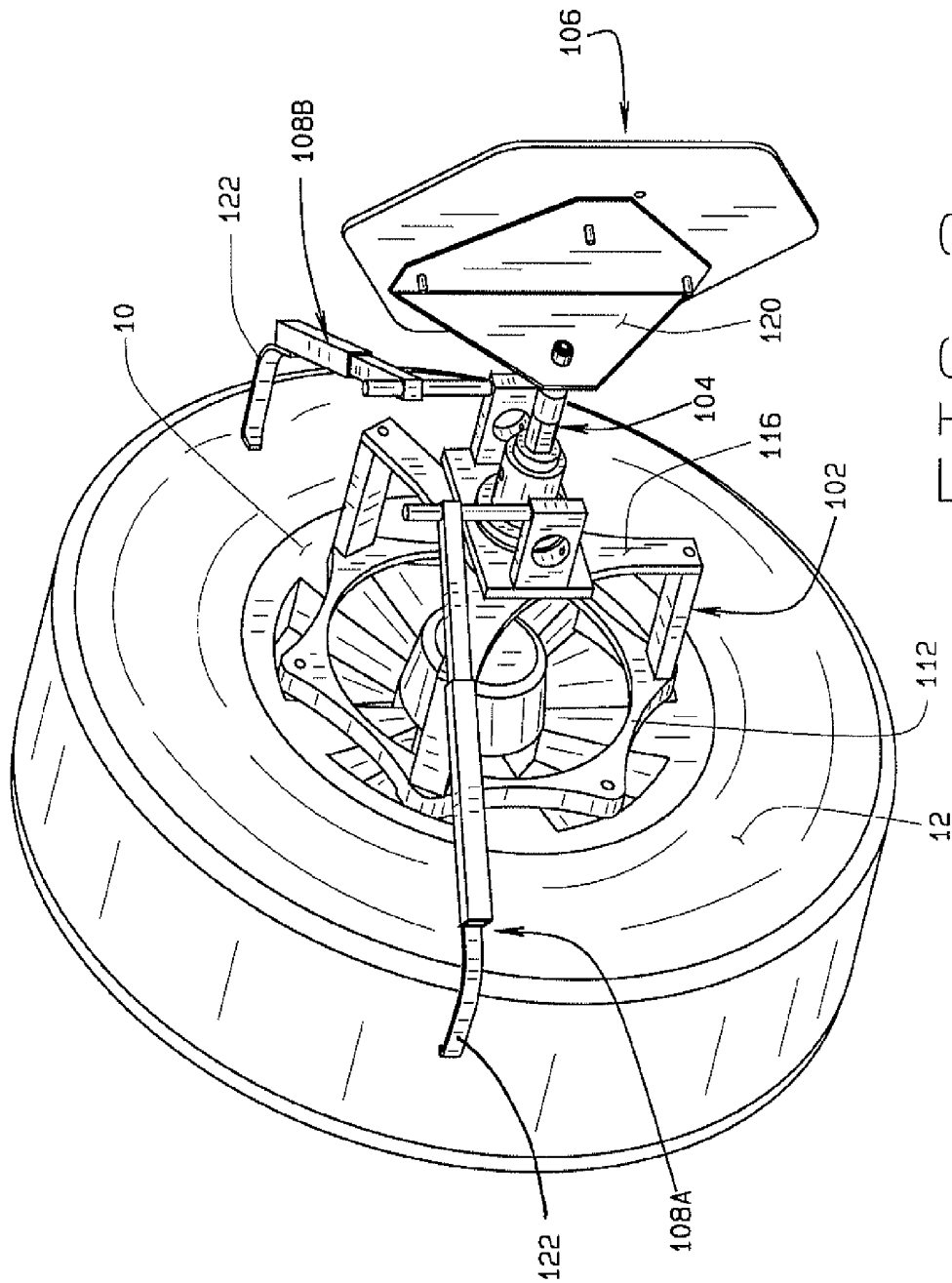


FIG. 2

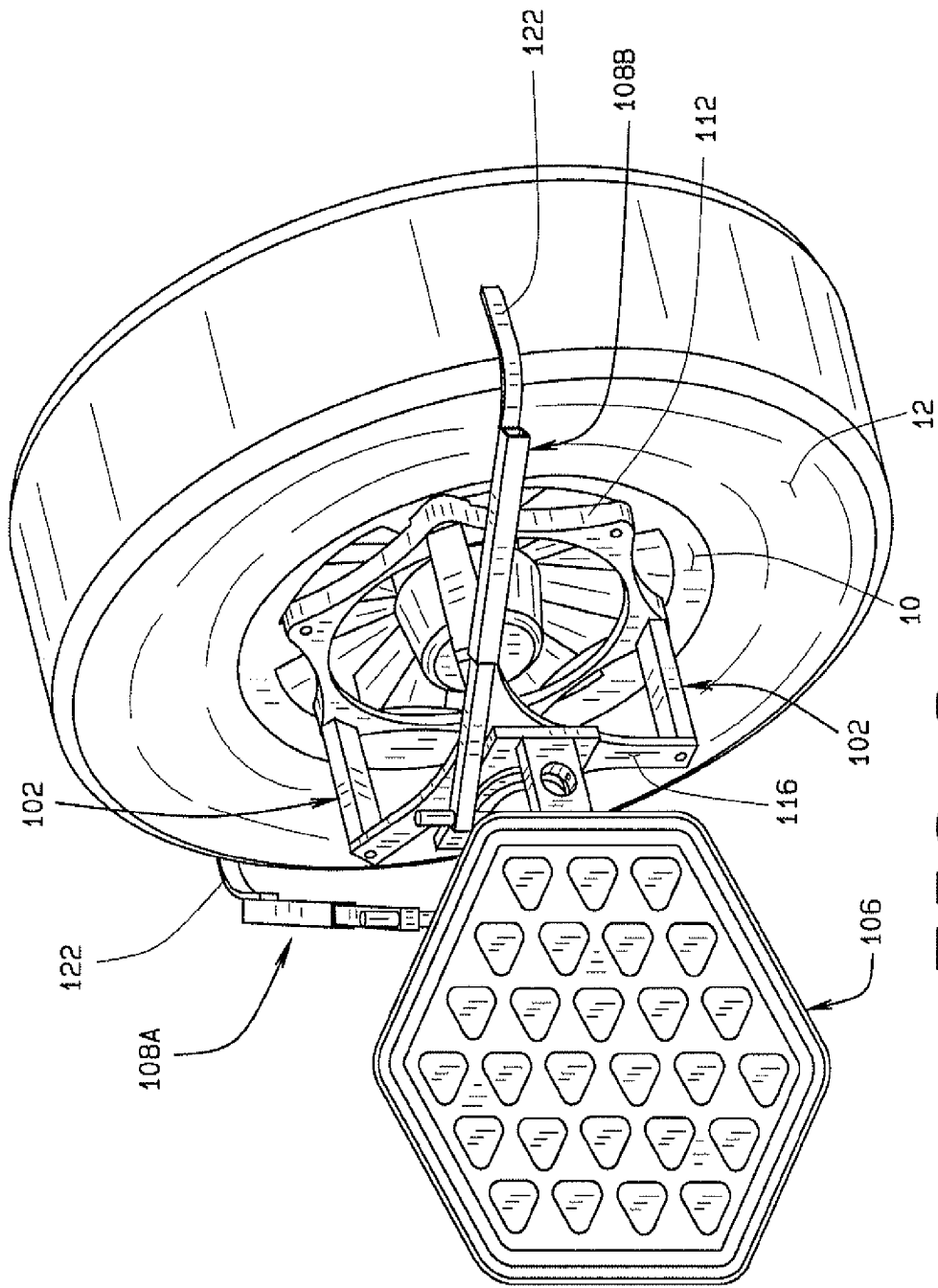


FIG. 3

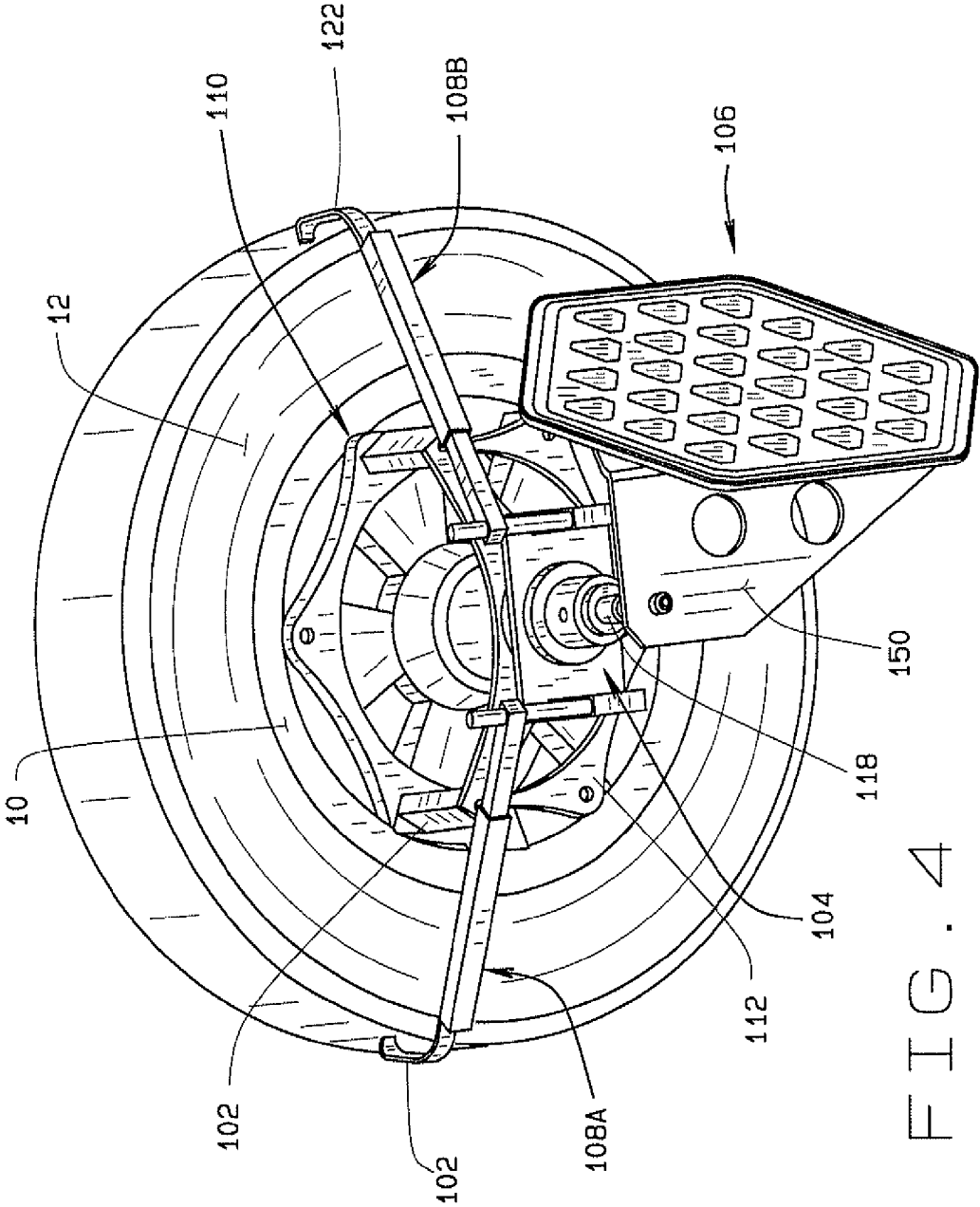


FIG. 4

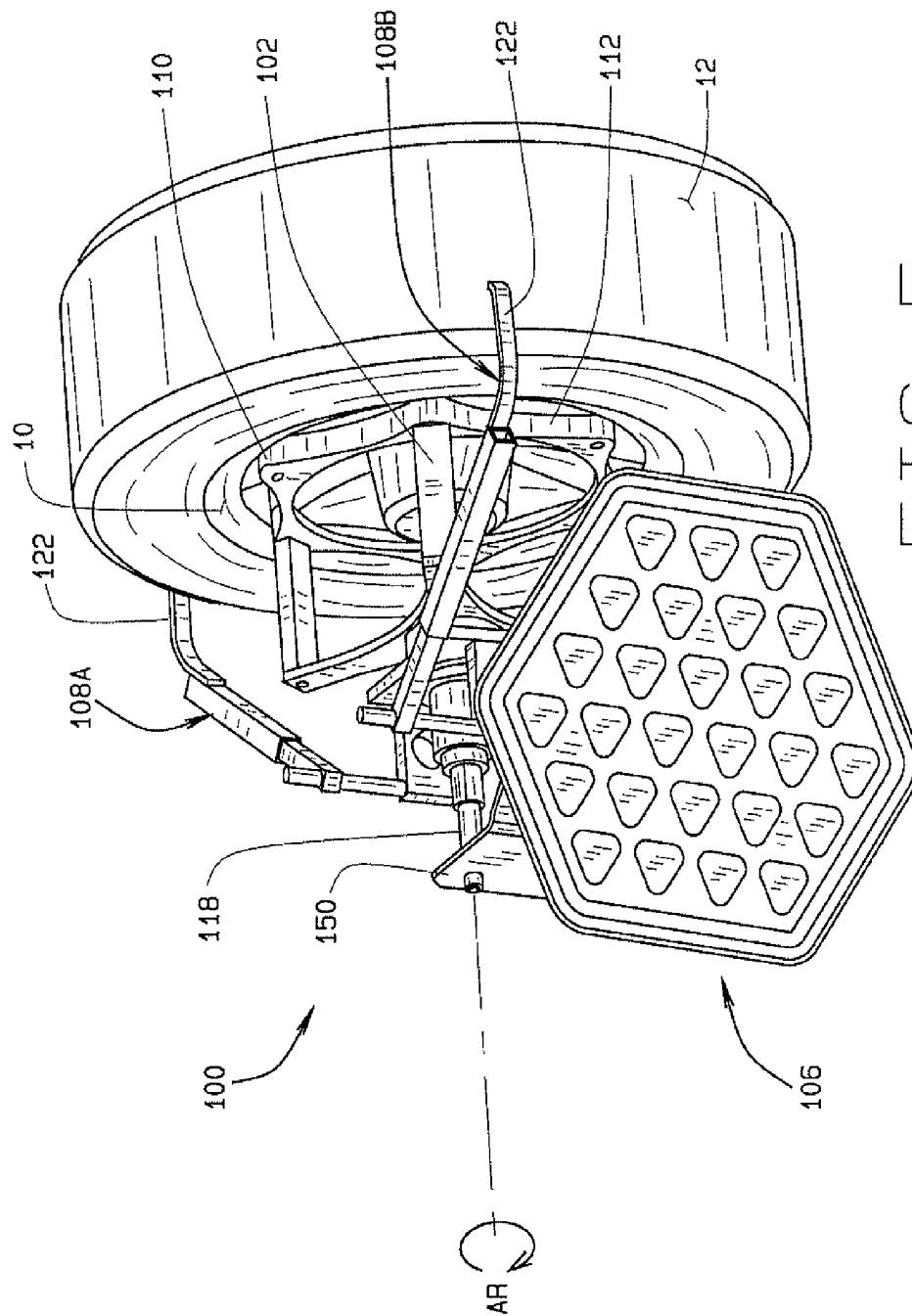


FIG. 5

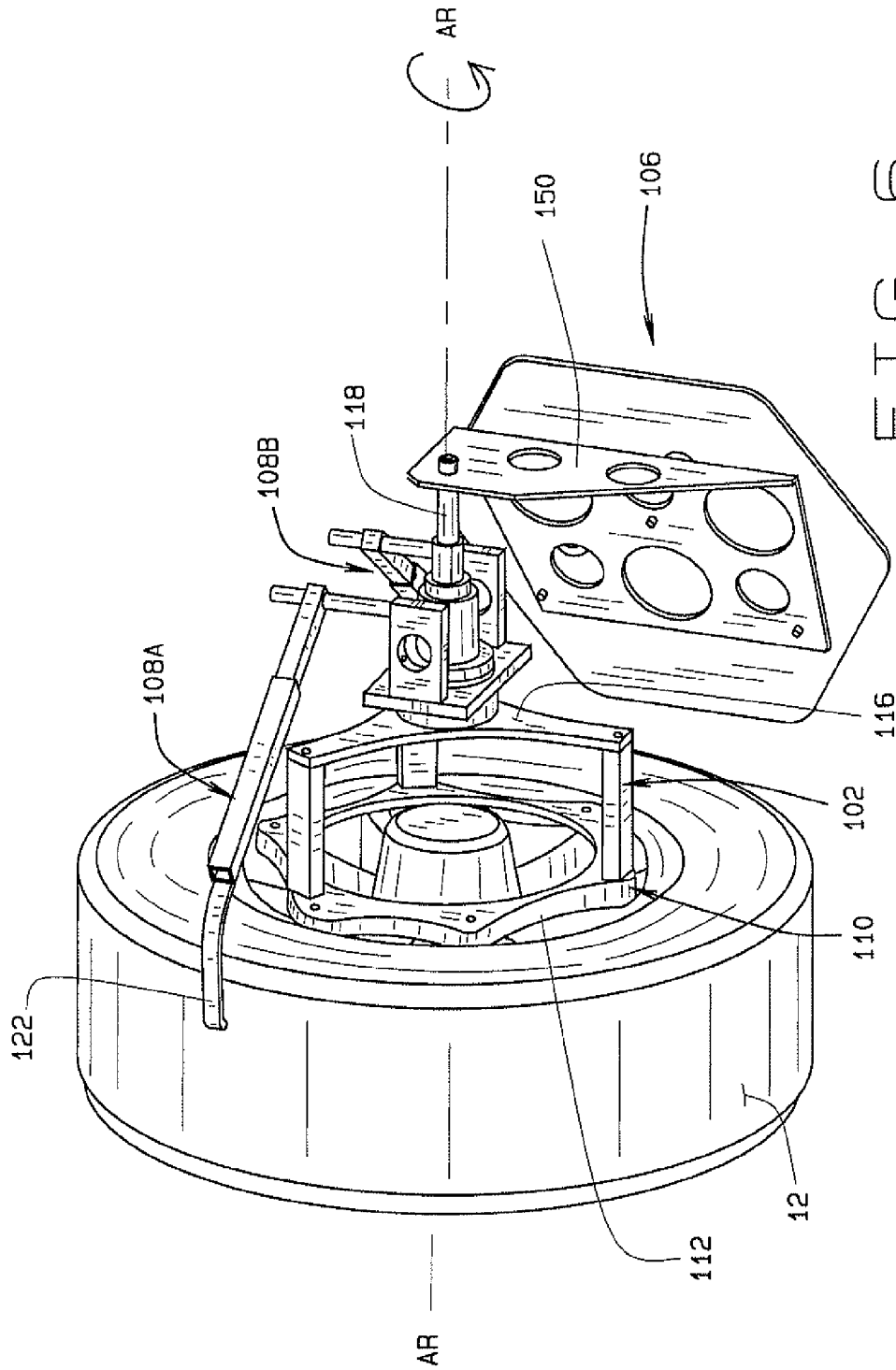


FIG. 6

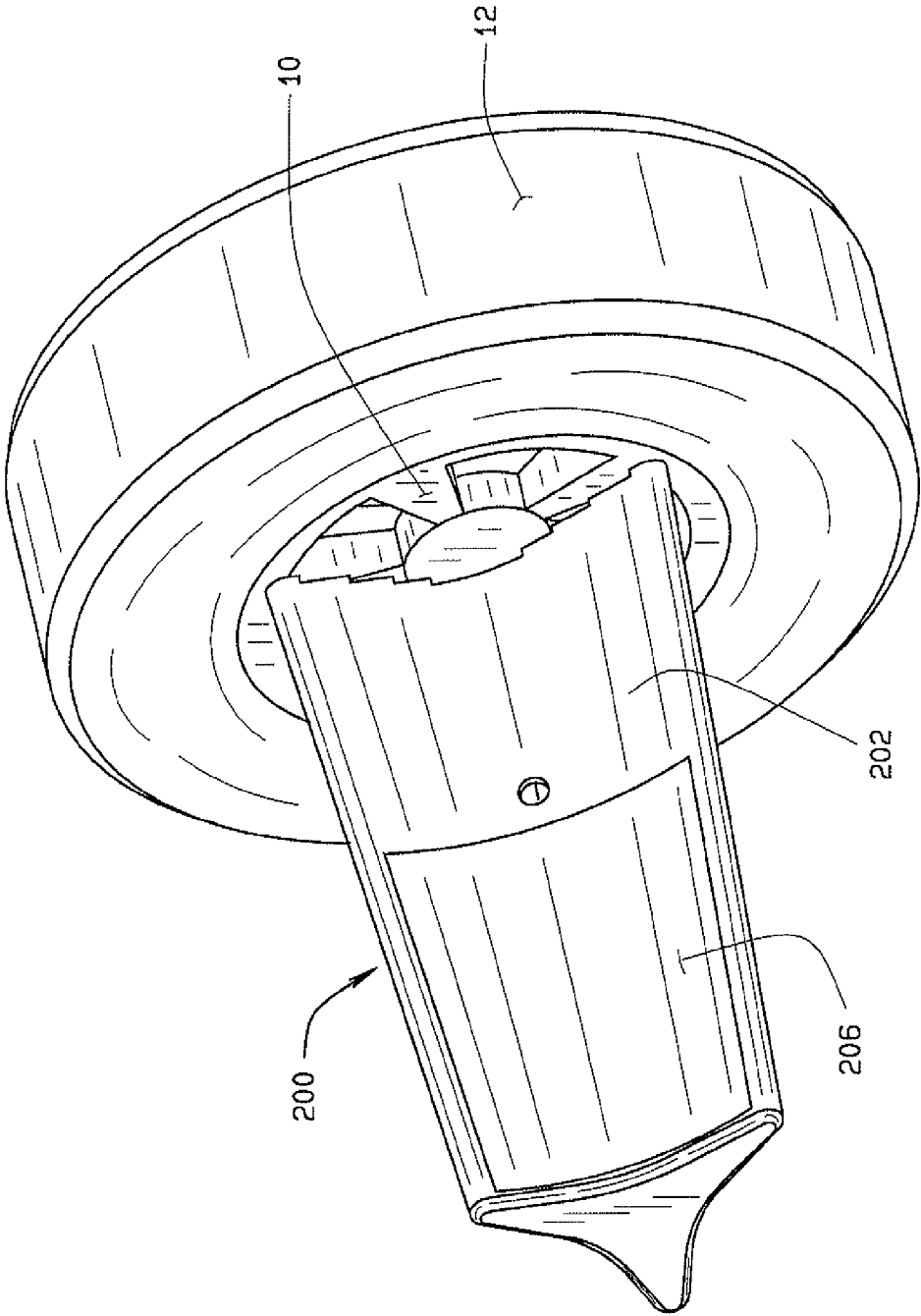


FIG. 7

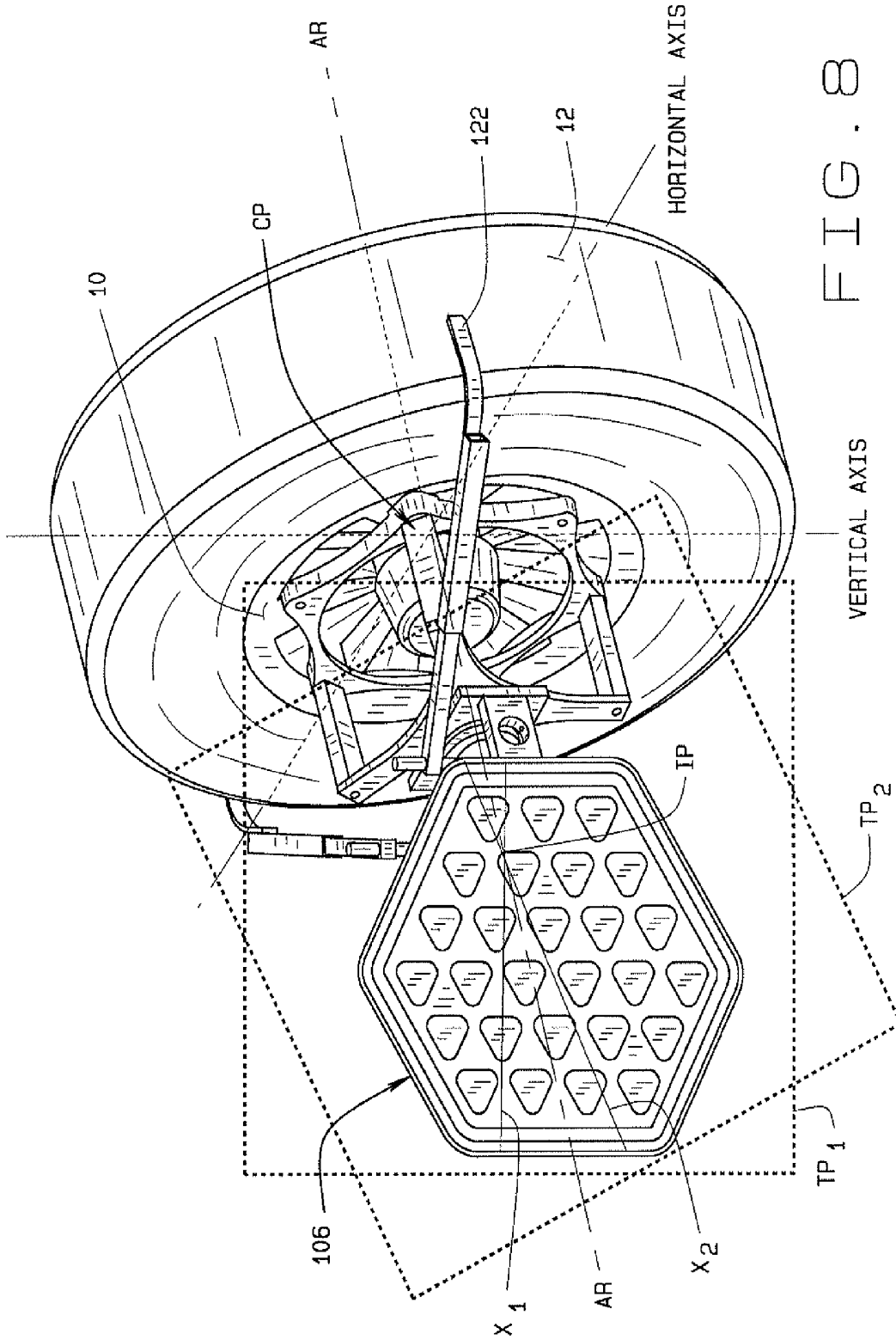


FIG. 8

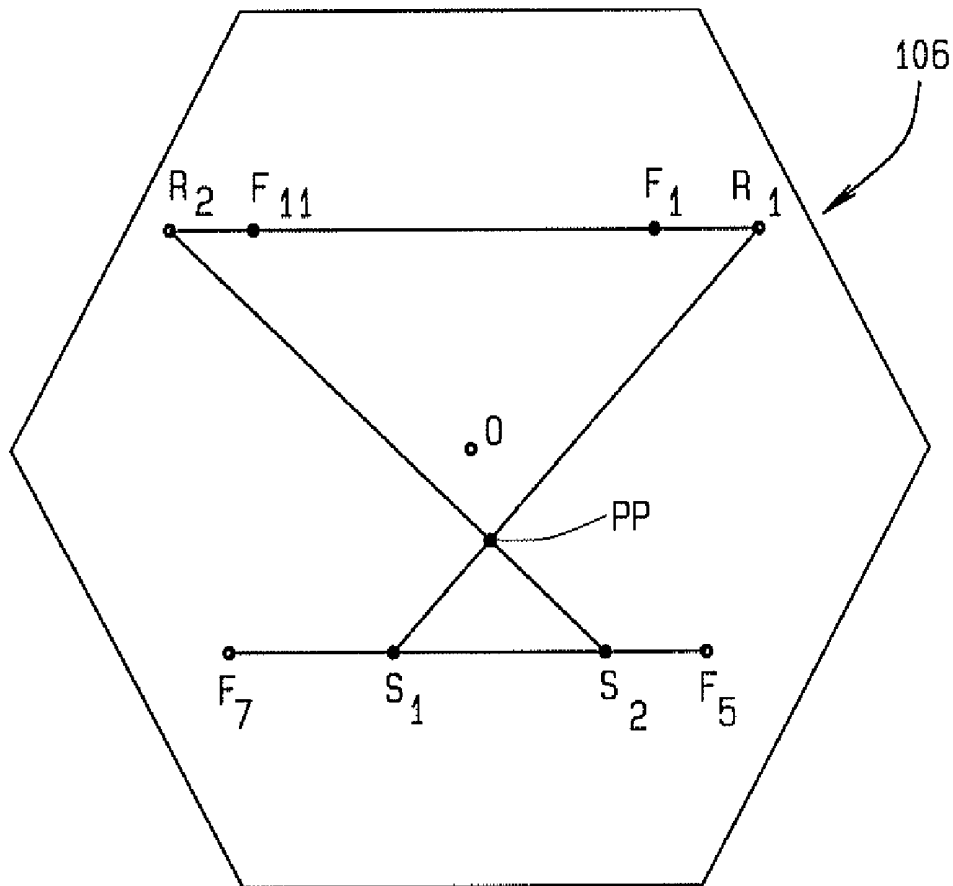


FIG. 9

**METHOD AND APPARATUS FOR VEHICLE
SERVICE SYSTEM OPTICAL TARGET
ASSEMBLY**

CROSS-REFERENCE TO RELATED
APPLICATIONS

The present application is a continuation of, and claims priority to, U.S. patent application Ser. No. 12/172,554 filed on Jul. 14, 2008, which in turn is a continuation of U.S. patent application Ser. No. 11/535,881 filed on Sep. 27, 2006, which in turn is related to, and claims priority from, U.S. Provisional Patent Application Ser. No. 60/721,206 filed on Sep. 28, 2005, each of the aforementioned applications herein incorporated by reference.

STATEMENT REGARDING FEDERALLY
SPONSORED RESEARCH

Not Applicable.

BACKGROUND OF THE INVENTION

The present invention relates to machine vision vehicle service systems, and in particular to an optical target assembly configured for mounting to a surface of a vehicle, such as a vehicle wheel, during a machine-vision vehicle wheel alignment procedure.

A machine-vision vehicle service system, such as a vehicle wheel alignment system like the Series 811 Wheel Alignment System utilizing the DSP 600 Series sensors, manufactured and sold by Hunter Engineering Company of Bridgeton, Mo., consists generally of a console having a computer or processing unit, one or more display devices such as a monitor, and one or more input devices such as a keyboard. In a machine-vision vehicle wheel alignment system, one or more imaging sensor arrays are mounted away from a vehicle undergoing an alignment inspection, and are configured to obtain images of alignment targets or other identifiable features associated with the vehicle for communication to the processing unit. Correspondingly, the processing unit is configured with one or more software applications, at least one of which is adapted to facilitate the alignment of vehicle wheels which generally consist of a rim and an associated tire, using input received from the imaging sensors.

The machine-vision imaging sensors are traditionally part of a camera system or imaging system configured to view optical targets within associated fields of view to obtain images thereof for processing by the software applications in the console. Commonly, the observed optical targets incorporate highly accurate patterns that have known control features. The positions and relationships of the features in the images are determined, and the orientation of the wheels or other vehicle components to which the optical targets are attached are calculated by well known algorithms. Exemplary configurations for the high-accuracy optical targets are described in U.S. Pat. No. 6,064,750 to January, and in U.S. Pat. No. 6,134,792 to January. Each optical target consists of a target face, on which are disposed identifiable optical elements, a precision flat base, and a mounting shaft adapted for attachment to a separate clamping assembly secured to the vehicle or vehicle wheel assembly.

The conventional configuration for an optical target is precisely engineered with high-contrast optical elements such as circles, squares, or triangles. The accuracy of such conventionally configured optical targets is dependant upon how well the high contrast edges of the optical target elements can

be located in an image produced by the imaging components of the wheel alignment system. For the best accuracy, the individual optical elements must be large enough to have relatively long straight or curved boundaries, and they must be separated far enough to prevent the individual optical target elements from appearing to fuse into a single object when reduced edge sharpness causes two or more optical target elements to bleed into the same pixel in the imaging system. These factors combine to limit the number of individual image pixels generated by the imaging system whose values are utilized to calculate a position and orientation of a conventionally configured optical target.

Each image of conventional high-contrast optical target acquired by the optical imaging vehicle wheel alignment system is processed to identify a number of reference points in the image. Either the computer or the imaging system is configured to mathematically manipulate the positional relationships of the observed reference points, as identified in an image, to match them with a set of predetermined positional relationships based on the known parameters of the conventional high-contrast optical target. Once the relationship between the observed positional relationships and the predetermined positional relationships is identified for the reference points, the position and orientation in three-dimensional space of the target (and an associated vehicle wheel) relative to the position and orientation of the imaging system is identified, from which one or more vehicle wheel alignment angles can be identified. Accordingly, for an optical imaging vehicle wheel alignment system to function, it is necessary for the system to be capable of extracting a set of control or reference points from acquired images.

To further facilitate the operation of a machine vision vehicle wheel alignment system, the separate optical targets are secured to the vehicle wheels with precision wheel adaptors configured to clamp onto the vehicle wheel edges and to position a mounting point for the optical target substantially coaxial with the wheel rim's axis of rotation. The traditional precision wheel adaptors typically include a set of claws or feet adapted to secure the wheel adaptor to the vehicle wheel assembly by engaging the lip or rim of the wheel rim at the tire junction. A centering mechanism on the wheel adaptor ensures that the claws or feet of the wheel adaptor are adjusted in a symmetrical manner to maintain the mounting point for the optical target in a determined centered configuration in relation to the axial center of the wheel rim.

Some variations of traditional wheel adaptors, such as the Tire Clamp Adaptor Model No. 20-1789-1 from Hunter Engineering Co., and those shown in U.S. Pat. No. 5,987,761 to Ohnesorge and U.S. Pat. No. 6,131,293 to Maioli et al. further utilize a set of gripping arms adapted to engage tire surfaces in conjunction with a set of contact supports and centering mechanisms for symmetrically engaging the circumferential lip of the wheel rim and securing the wheel adaptors in an axially centered position on the vehicle wheel assembly.

Other vehicle-specific wheel adaptors, such as those for use with Mercedes Benz and BMW automobiles, are configured with a set of pins which are designed to pass through the wheel assembly, and to contact predetermined surfaces on the vehicle wheel hubs, positioning the vehicle-specific wheel adaptor in a predetermined axially centered location about the wheel assembly. These vehicle specific wheel adaptors are then held in place by means of tire clamps or spring mechanisms which grip to the tire tread surfaces.

Traditional wheel adaptors that will universally adapt to the wide range of wheel sizes on the market today are difficult to design and costly to build. Many times additional parts are required, such as extenders, in order to allow the adaptor to

work with wheels that are very small or very large which also adds additional cost and complication to the adaptor system. Additionally, traditional adaptors have to provide a substantial amount of clamping force in order to hold the weight of the target or sensor on the wheel assembly. This clamping force can scratch or dent the wheel assembly where it is attached. This is very undesirable especially when the wheel assembly is a very costly aftermarket wheel.

Accordingly, it would be advantageous to provide a machine vision vehicle service system, such as a wheel alignment system, with an optical target assembly which incorporates both the optical target and a simplified adaptor for attachment to a vehicle wheel, and which does not require a determined precision mounting on the vehicle wheel assembly in relation to the wheel axis of rotation.

It would be further advantageous to provide a machine vision vehicle wheel alignment system with a mechanically simplified optical target assembly which is light weight, dimensionally stable, less abrasive to the wheel rim surfaces, and which does not require precision construction.

BRIEF SUMMARY OF THE INVENTION

Briefly stated, the present invention provides a machine vision vehicle wheel alignment system optical target assembly which incorporates an adaptor for attachment of an optical target to a vehicle wheel assembly. The adaptor includes at least one fixed contact point for seating in a non-determined position against surfaces of a vehicle wheel assembly, and a pair of clamping arms configured to grip tread surfaces of a tire mounted to the wheel rim to hold the optical target assembly in contact with the wheel assembly surface. The optical target is secured to the adaptor, and maintained in a stationary relationship to the wheel assembly thereby during a vehicle wheel alignment procedure.

In an alternate embodiment, the present invention provides an improved machine vision vehicle wheel alignment system having a processing unit and at least one imaging sensor for acquiring images of a non-planar target having a plurality of visible features. The non-planar target is removably secured against a vehicle wheel assembly surface, within a field of view of the imaging sensor. A processing unit receives data representative of said visible features from the imaging sensor, and determines at least an axis of rotation of the vehicle wheel utilizing the received data.

The foregoing and other objects, features, and advantages of the invention as well as presently preferred embodiments thereof will become more apparent from the reading of the following description in connection with the accompanying drawings.

BRIEF DESCRIPTION OF THE SEVERAL VIEWS OF THE DRAWINGS

In the accompanying drawings which form part of the specification:

FIG. 1 is a perspective rear view of a first embodiment of the optical target assembly of the present invention;

FIG. 2 is perspective rear view of the embodiment of FIG. 1 secured to a vehicle wheel assembly;

FIG. 3 is a perspective front view of FIG. 2;

FIG. 4 is a perspective side view of an alternate embodiment of the optical target assembly of the present invention;

FIG. 5 is a perspective front view of the embodiment shown in FIG. 4;

FIG. 6 is a perspective rear view of the embodiment shown in FIG. 4;

FIG. 7 is a perspective front view of a second alternate embodiment of the optical target assembly of the present invention;

FIG. 8 is a perspective illustration of an optical target assembly of FIG. 1 mounted to a vehicle wheel, rotated between two positions about an axis of rotation; and

FIG. 9 is a simplified representation of reference points and associated interrelationships on an optical target face.

Corresponding reference numerals indicate corresponding parts throughout the several figures of the drawings.

DESCRIPTION OF THE PREFERRED EMBODIMENT

The following detailed description illustrates the invention by way of example and not by way of limitation. The description clearly enables one skilled in the art to make and use the invention, describes several embodiments, adaptations, variations, alternatives, and uses of the invention, including what is presently believed to be the best mode of carrying out the invention.

Turning to FIG. 1, an embodiment of the optical target assembly 100 of the present invention is shown in a rear perspective view. The optical target assembly 100 consists of a simplified or unitary base assembly 102, a pair of opposed wheel clamp arms 108A and 108B coupled to the base assembly, a target support assembly 104 coupled to the base assembly 102, and an optical target 106 secured to the target support assembly.

The simplified or unitary base assembly 102 defines one or more fixed contact surfaces 110 adapted for abutting contact with the generally vertical outer surfaces of a vehicle wheel rim 10 between the outer circumferential lip of the wheel rim and the wheel assembly axis of rotation. The fixed contact surfaces 110 are disposed in a common plane, and as shown in FIG. 1, and are disposed equidistantly about the circumference of an annular member 112, defining a central opening 114 adapted to surround an axial hub-end portion of the vehicle wheel rim 10. A raised support assembly 116 is coaxially secured to the annular member 112 opposite from the fixed contact surfaces 110, extending over the central opening 114 to provide clearance for the hub-end portion of the vehicle wheel rim 10 and to provide support for the various attached components. Since the assembly 102 of the present invention is intended for a non-determined placement against the wheel assembly surface, the assembly 102 does not include any adjustment mechanisms for centering the contact surfaces 110 relative to either the wheel rim circumferential lip or axis of rotation, such as those commonly found in self-centering or adjustable wheel adaptors.

To hold the fixed contact surfaces 110 in engagement with a generally vertical surface of a vehicle wheel rim 10, as shown in FIG. 2, a pair of opposed wheel clamp arms 108A and 108B coupled to the support assembly 116 of the base assembly 102. Each wheel clamp arm 108 includes a tire hook 122 disposed on an end opposite from the support assembly 116. The tire hook is configured to grip a tire tread surface of a vehicle wheel 12. Each opposed wheel clamp arm 108 is adjustable to accommodate wheel assemblies of different dimensions.

For example, as shown in FIGS. 1 and 2, the wheel clamp arms 108A and 108B may each be extended or retracted along a longitudinal axis, pivoted about an attachment point to the support assembly 116, or adjusted vertically relative to the attachment point. Those of ordinary skill in the art will recognize that any of a variety of mechanical components may be utilized to achieve the desired range of movement for the

wheel clamp arms **108**, including, but not limited to, sliding assemblies, threaded assemblies, pivoting assemblies, and expanding assemblies. It is not required that the wheel clamp arms **108** be adjusted synchronously, or that they be disposed in mirror-image configurations, provided the wheel clamp arms **108** are sufficiently positioned to engage the tire tread surfaces of a vehicle wheel to secure the fixed contact surfaces **110** of the base assembly **102** against the surfaces of the wheel rim **10** between the circumferential lip and the axial center point, in a stationary and stable manner during wheel alignment angle measurements and procedures.

As seen in FIGS. 1-3, the target support assembly **104** is coaxially secured to the support assembly **116**, and comprises a coaxial target support shaft **118** and a target support flange **120** secured to the target support shaft **118**. The target support flange **120** is adjustably coupled to the end of the target support shaft **118**, and is configured to support the optical target **106** at an angled orientation relative to the longitudinal axis of the target support shaft **118**.

The optical target **106** provides visible features which are identifiable in images acquired by an imaging system associated with a vehicle service device, and which provide a sufficient number of data points to enable a determination as to the position and orientation of the optical target **106** in three-dimensional space from acquired images. For example, the optical target **106** may include a set of geometric figures arranged in a predetermined configuration as shown in U.S. Pat. No. 6,134,792 to January, herein incorporated by reference, or simply a set of identifiable fixed features, such as shown in U.S. Pat. No. 6,894,771 to Dorrance et al., herein incorporated by reference. The visible features (data points) of the optical target **106** need not be disposed on a planar surface, but rather, may be disposed on any dimensionally stable surface or shape, including non-planar surfaces, smoothly curved surfaces, or angled surfaces.

It is less costly to manufacture a target where the identifiable fixed features are not precisely known. U.S. Pat. No. 6,894,771 to Dorrance et al. describes an optimization method that may be employed to precisely determine the location of the features by acquiring multiple images of the target while it is rotated. This method could be used on every alignment that is performed when the vehicle is rolled on the runway surface to determine the axis of rotation, or the method may be performed once as a target calibration procedure where the location of the features are stored and later used via methods outlined by U.S. Pat. No. 6,134,792 to January.

In an alternate embodiment of the present invention, shown in FIGS. 4-6, an offset target support flange **150** is adjustably coupled to the end of the target support shaft **118**, and is configured to support the optical target **106** at an angled orientation offset relative to the longitudinal axis of the target support shaft **118**. Specifically, as is best seen in FIG. 5, the optical target **106** is secured to the offset target support flange **150** and maintained in an outward position from the vehicle wheel assembly which is below, and in-front of, the axis of rotation AR of the vehicle wheel assembly when mounted thereon.

By positioning the optical target **106** in an offset position which is below and in-front of the wheel assembly axis of rotation AR, the optical target **106** remains visible within the field of view of imaging sensors disposed in-front of the vehicle over a wider range of steering movement for the vehicle wheel assembly. As a vehicle wheel assembly is steered in an outward direction about a steering axis, the leading edge of the tire **12** will occlude a line of sight between an imaging sensor disposed in-front of the vehicle and an

optical target **106** disposed substantially coaxial with the vehicle wheel assembly axis of rotation AR. To counter-act this effect, coaxially mounted optical targets **106** generally must be disposed sufficiently outward from the surface of the vehicle wheel assembly so as to remain visible throughout the desired range of steering angles. As the optical target mounting is moved outward from the surface of the vehicle wheel rim **10**, the weight of the optical target **106** acts on the various target support assemblies **100** over a greater distance, requiring a corresponding increase in attachment strength to maintain the optical target **106** in a secured position against the vehicle wheel assembly. Accordingly, by disposing the optical target **106** below and in-front of the vehicle wheel axis of rotation AR, the leading edge of the tire **12** does not occlude as much of the optical target surface during a steering movement, and corresponding, the optical target **106** does not have to be disposed as far outward from the vehicle wheel rim surface **10** as an on-axis optical target would be, resulting in a reduction in the attachment strength required to maintain the offset optical target **106** in a secure position against the vehicle wheel assembly surface.

Those of ordinary skill in the art will recognize that the specific positioning of the optical target **106** off of the vehicle wheel assembly axis of rotation AR may vary, depending upon the particular configuration of the vehicle wheel assembly, adjacent vehicle body components, and the placement of the imaging sensors disposed to view the optical target **106**. Accordingly, it is intended that any of a variety of optical target support assemblies, having different configurations and attachment components for maintaining an optical target **106** in a secure position and orientation relative to a vehicle wheel assembly surface may be utilized within the scope of the invention.

For example, turning to FIG. 7, an alternate embodiment of the optical target support assembly is shown generally at **200**. The optical target support assembly **200** is of unitary construction, incorporating an optical target **206** directly onto an exterior surface of the support assembly **200**, opposite from one or more fixed contact surfaces **210**. As shown in FIG. 7, the optical target support assembly **200** is generally coaxial with the vehicle wheel axis or rotation AR, but those of ordinary skill in the art will recognize that the optical target support assembly **200** may be varied in shape, size, and configuration to position the incorporated optical target **206** into a surface of the support assembly **200** at other desired positions and orientations relative to a vehicle wheel axis of rotation, such as previously described. A base **202** of the support assembly defines the fixed contact surfaces **210** adapted to contact a generally vertical outer surface of a vehicle wheel rim **10** between the circumferential lip of the wheel rim and the axis of rotation AR. The contact surfaces **210** are disposed in a common plane, and as shown in FIG. 4, are disposed equidistantly about the circumference of the base **202**, adapted to surround an axial hub-end portion of the vehicle wheel rim **10**. Preferably, the body is formed from a molded plastic or other lightweight material.

Any of a variety of mechanisms may be utilized to hold the optical target support assembly **200** against the surface of a vehicle wheel assembly during use, provided the target support assembly **200** is maintained in a fixed position against the surface of the vehicle wheel assembly. For example, wheel clamp arms (not shown) may be utilized in substantially the same manner as previously described to grip the tread surface of the vehicle wheel tire **12**, or flexible "bungee" style elastic cords may be utilized to "pull" the optical target support assembly against the face surfaces of the vehicle wheel rim **10**. Similarly, removable adhesives or magnets of sufficient

strength to support the optical target support assembly 200 may be utilized on suitable surfaces.

During use, an optical target support assembly of the present invention, such as shown at 100 or 200, is positioned against a generally vertical outer surface of a vehicle wheel rim 10, such that the visible features of the optical target 106, 206 associated with the support assembly are orientated for viewing by one or more imaging sensors. The specific placement of the support assembly against the outer surface of the wheel rim 10 need not be coaxial with the wheel assembly, i.e., may be eccentric with the vehicle wheel assembly, but must be sufficiently stable to prevent the optical target from tilting, wobbling, or slipping from the initial position during a vehicle service procedure. To maintain the optical target support assembly in a stable position against the wheel rim surface, suitable support mechanisms, such as the wheel clamp arms shown in FIGS. 2 and 3, are adjusted to grip tread surfaces of the vehicle tire 12, preferably above a horizontal plane through which the wheel axis of rotation AR passes. The interaction of gravity, the optical target support mechanisms, and the fixed contact surfaces of the optical target support assembly interact to maintain the fixed contact surfaces against the wheel rim surface, and to hold the optical target 106, 206 in a stable position during a vehicle service procedure and through a limited range of wheel assembly movement.

Since the optical target 106, 206 disposed on the optical target support assembly is not secured to the vehicle wheel assembly in any predetermined position, e.g., concentric with the wheel axis of rotation AR, it is necessary to determine the wheel axis of rotation AR for purposes of calculating vehicle wheel alignment angle measurements from images of the optical targets 106, 206. It is also desirable to compute the wheel assembly center point to further increase accuracy of the alignment measurements. Methods to determine the axis of rotation and center point are described in the co-pending U.S. patent application Ser. No. 11/013,057, herein incorporated by reference.

For example, a three-dimensional direction vector corresponding to a wheel assembly's axis of rotation AR and a point corresponding to the wheel assembly center point CP can be estimated from two or more optical target location "snapshots", taken as the wheel assembly is rotated partially about the axis of rotation AR. Mathematical techniques may be used to obtain a direction vector from the optical target location and attitude information contained in two or more snapshots. The acquired sequence of images is utilized to identify an actual intersection point IP between the axis of rotation AR of the vehicle wheel assembly and the surface of the optical target 106, 206 as a point on the optical target surface having the least amount of linear deviation in the sequence of images.

A reference point, such as the wheel center point CP may be established for a vehicle wheel using an optical target 106, 206 operatively coupled to the vehicle wheel in a predetermined relationship, such as shown in FIG. 8. Two or more images of the wheel-mounted optical target are acquired at different rotational positions of the vehicle wheel, and a position and orientation of the wheel-mounted optical target is determined in a three-dimensional coordinated system from the acquired images.

The three-dimensional direction vector corresponding to a wheel's axis of rotation AR can also be estimated from two or more optical target location "snapshots", taken as the wheel assembly is rotated about the axis of rotation AR. Mathematical techniques may be used to obtain a direction vector from the target location and attitude information contained in two

or more snapshots. Although direction information can be obtained, specific points in space which are known to lie on the wheel's axis-of-rotation AR are not identified.

Using the predetermined relationship between the wheel-mounted optical target with the vehicle wheel, and the predetermined configuration of the optical target, an intersection point IP is identified in the three-dimensional coordinate system between an axis of rotation AR of the vehicle wheel and an observed surface of the optical target. This intersection point IP is referred to as the "nominal piercing point". Assuming that the actual configuration of the wheel and the optical target conforms with the predetermined configurations thereof, the predetermined configuration of the wheel-mounted optical target and the intersection point IP are utilized to identify a point on the axis of rotation AR which is displaced from the optical target surface by a predetermined distance, based on the known configuration of the optical target and vehicle wheel. The identified point corresponds to the wheel center point CP of the vehicle wheel.

Alternatively, a wheel center point CP for a vehicle wheel may be determined from a sequence of images of an optical target operatively coupled to the vehicle wheel. The vehicle wheel is rotated about the axis of rotation AR while a sequence of at least two images of the wheel-mounted optical target is acquired. The acquired sequence of images is utilized by the vehicle wheel alignment system to identify an actual intersection point IP between the axis of rotation AR of the vehicle wheel and the face of the optical target as a point on the optical target surface having the least amount of linear deviation in the sequence of images.

Those of ordinary skill in the art will recognize that several methods may be utilized to identify the actual intersection point IP on the target surface, for example, a non-linear optimization technique such as the Levenberg-Marquardt algorithm may be employed to solve an over-determined system of simultaneous equations to identify the point on the optical target surface having the least amount of linear movement between two or more sequential images. However, non-linear optimization techniques are preferably utilized in situations where the wheel assembly is permitted to roll in a linear direction and a series of images of the optical target surface are captured. It is assumed that the axis of rotation AR of the wheel assembly will continue to point in the same direction in each of the images.

Alternatively, planes TP1 and TP2 which are defined by the features on the optical target surface are identified in each image of the optical target 106, 206 at two different rotational positions of the vehicle wheel assembly, without requiring translational movement of the vehicle wheel assembly, i.e. when a vehicle is jacked up above a supporting surface and the wheel assembly is not resting on the surface during rotation. An equation representative of a line of intersection between each of the two planes TP1 and TP2 is determined in a coordinate system based on the first plane TP1, and next in a coordinate system based on the second plane TP2. There are therefore two separate planar lines X1 and X2 determined in the two separate planar coordinate systems and only one line AR determined by the intersection of the two planes TP1 and TP2 in a three dimensional coordinate system. The single point of intersection of the two lines X1 and X2 in a common coordinate system, preferably the coordinate system of the optical target surface, represents the actual intersection point IP between the axis of rotation AR of the wheel assembly and the optical target surface.

The actual intersection point IP, together with the configuration of the optical target are utilized to identify a point on the axis of rotation AR displaced from the target surface, corre-

sponding to the wheel center point CP for the vehicle wheel assembly. With reference to FIG. 6, the method for determining the actual intersection point IP using intersecting lines is described in more detail. An optical target surface coordinate system is initially established based on visible features F of the optical target 106, 206. Precise coordinates are predetermined for all the features F on the optical target surface. The origin of the optical target surface coordinates is based on a feature (real or determined) at the center of the array of visible features F. Four feature points F1, F5, F7, and F11 around the periphery of the optical target surface are used in the method. These four outer features F of the optical target surface are selected to each lie at the same radius from the target origin O. Although many sets of four features F could be employed, the preferred method uses features arrayed around the optical target surface in a manner analogous to particular hours on a clock face. Feature F1 corresponds to one o'clock, feature F5 corresponds to five o'clock, feature F7 corresponds to seven o'clock and feature F11 corresponds to eleven o'clock.

The optical target is generally positioned relative to the vehicle wheel assembly by the optical target support assembly 102, 202 such that the axis-of-rotation AR is not normal and not parallel to the optical target surface. There are four coordinate systems involved in the method, an imaging system or camera coordinate system that identifies the position and attitude of objects relative to the imaging system or camera measurement sensors of a vehicle service system, an optical target surface coordinate system that identifies the location of optical target features relative to the center of the pattern on the optical target surface, and are two snapshot coordinate systems, Snap1 and Snap2.

The Snap1 coordinate system is such, that any point in space is assigned coordinates that match the optical target surface coordinates the point would have when the optical target surface is aligned with the first image snapshot position. Analogously, the Snap2 coordinate system matches optical target surface coordinates when the optical target surface is aligned with the second image snapshot position.

An instantaneous coordinate transform between optical target coordinates and camera coordinates is computed. Therefore, the two image snapshots facilitate computation of coordinate transforms between all four of the above-mentioned coordinate systems.

Initially, the Snap1 coordinates of features F11 and F1 are obtained. These will be the same as the optical target surface coordinates of those features, according to the precise design model of the optical target. The coordinates of these features are transformed into Snap2 coordinates. Both points will probably be outside the Snap2 optical target face plane (which would have a z coordinate of zero). A line is defined between the two points and the point R where that line intersects the Snap2 optical target face plane is identified. Point R lies in both snapshot planes. The set of coordinates that describe point R in Snap1 coordinates is designated R1, and the set of coordinates that describe point R in Snap2 coordinates is designated R2. Because R2 lies in the second snapshot optical target face plane, the z-coordinate of R2 is zero.

The known transform between the coordinate systems is applied to find the coordinates of point R in Snap1 coordinates, i.e. R1. Because R1 lies in the first snapshot optical target face plane, the z-coordinate of R1 is zero.

Next, the Snap1 coordinates of where features F7 and F5 appeared during the first snapshot are obtained. These will be the same as the optical target coordinates of those features, according to the model of the optical target. The two points are transformed into Snap2 coordinates. Both points may be outside the Snap2 optical target face plane (which would have a z coordinate of zero). A line is formed between the two points and the point where that line intersects the Snap2

optical target face plane is identified. The intersection in space will be called point S, and lies in both snapshot planes. Together, points R and S define the line in space where the two snapshot planes intersect. The set of coordinates that describe point S in Snap2 coordinates will be called S2. Because S2 lies in the second snapshot target face plane, the z-coordinate of S2 is zero.

The known transform between coordinate systems is again applied to find the coordinates of point S in Snap1 coordinates. These coordinates will be referred to as S1. Because S1 lies in the first snapshot optical target face plane, the z-coordinate of S1 is zero.

Next, R1, R2, S1 and S2 are identified on the same two-dimensional grid of target coordinates. All four have a z-coordinate of zero, so they may be treated as X-Y coordinate pairs. The equation of the line joining the coordinate pairs R1 and S1 is identified. This line represents the set of Snap1 coordinates for all points that lie on both snapshot planes. Next, the equation of the line that joins the coordinate pairs R2 and S2 is identified, representing the set of Snap2 coordinates for all points that lie on both snapshot planes. Solving these two line equations simultaneously yields the X and Y optical target surface coordinates of the actual piercing point PP through which the axis of rotation of the vehicle wheel passes through the optical target surface.

The present invention can be embodied in part in the form of computer-implemented processes and apparatuses for practicing those processes. The present invention can also be embodied in part in the form of computer program code containing instructions embodied in tangible media, such as floppy diskettes, CD-ROMs, hard drives, or an other computer readable storage medium, wherein, when the computer program code is loaded into, and executed by, an electronic device such as a computer, micro-processor or logic circuit, the device becomes an apparatus for practicing the invention.

The present invention can also be embodied in part in the form of computer program code, for example, whether stored in a storage medium, loaded into and/or executed by a computer, or transmitted over some transmission medium, such as over electrical wiring or cabling, through fiber optics, or via electromagnetic radiation, wherein, when the computer program code is loaded into and executed by a computer, the computer becomes an apparatus for practicing the invention. When implemented in a general-purpose microprocessor, the computer program code segments configure the microprocessor to create specific logic circuits.

In view of the above, it will be seen that the several objects of the invention are achieved and other advantageous results are obtained. As various changes could be made in the above constructions without departing from the scope of the invention, it is intended that all matter contained in the above description or shown in the accompanying drawings shall be interpreted as illustrative and not in a limiting sense.

The invention claimed is:

1. A method for determining the alignment of a vehicle wheel, comprising the steps of:
 - attaching a single optical target with a dimensionally stable shape to the vehicle wheel, wherein the optical target has thereon a plurality of target elements arranged in a known geometric and spatial configuration relative to each other, and wherein said dimensionally stable shape is a three dimensional shape which includes at least one non-planar target surface or smoothly curved target surface upon which said plurality of target elements is arranged;
 - detecting, from a two-dimensional image of the single optical target acquired by an imaging system, a plurality of target element images corresponding to the plurality of target elements arranged on the non-planar or smoothly curved target surface of the optical target; and

determining the alignment of the vehicle wheel based on a spatial orientation of the optical target identified from the plurality of target element images and the known geometric and spatial configuration of the plurality of target elements on the non-planar or smoothly curved target surface of the optical target.

2. The method of claim 1 wherein the step of determining the alignment of the vehicle wheel comprises the step of detecting an image feature of at least one target element image.

3. A method for determining the alignment of a vehicle wheel, comprising the steps of:

- securing a single optical target with a dimensionally stable shape to said vehicle wheel, said optical target having thereon a plurality of target elements arranged in a known geometric and spatial configuration relative to each other on at least two surfaces;
- acquiring a two-dimensional image of the optical target using at least one imaging sensor;
- utilizing the acquired image of the optical target to determine wheel alignment based on the optical target, said acquired two-dimensional image including images of at least one target element from each of said surfaces.

4. The method of claim 3 for determining the alignment of a vehicle wheel wherein said at least two surfaces are angled relative to each other.

5. The method of claim 3 for determining the alignment of a vehicle wheel

- wherein said step of utilizing the acquired image of the optical target further utilizes said target element images to determine wheel alignment based on the optical target.

6. A system for determining the alignment of a vehicle wheel, comprising:

- an optical target for attachment to a vehicle wheel, wherein the optical target has at least two surfaces with a plurality of target elements arranged thereon in geometric and spatial configurations relative to each other;
- an imaging system for acquiring two-dimensional images of the optical target;
- a target element feature detecting system for detecting, from said acquired images, a plurality of target element images corresponding to at least some of the plurality of target elements, including said at least one target element from said first surface, and said at least one target element from said second surface; and
- a wheel alignment system processing unit for determining the alignment of the vehicle wheel based on a spatial orientation of the optical target determined in accordance with the detected target element images and the geometric and spatial configuration of the target elements on the optical target surfaces.

7. The system of claim 6 wherein said target elements are arranged in known geometric and spatial configurations relative to each other.

8. The system of claim 6 wherein said wheel alignment system processing unit is configured to determine the geometric and spatial configurations of the target elements on the optical target surfaces from said acquired images prior to determining the spatial orientation of the optical target.

9. The system of claim 6 wherein said imaging system includes a plurality of imaging sensors configured to acquire said images of the optical target.

10. A method for determining a measurement relating to an object, comprising the steps of:

- associating an optical target with the object, wherein the optical target has at least two surfaces with a plurality of

- target elements arranged thereon in geometric and spatial configurations relative to each other;
- detecting, from at least one two-dimensional image of the optical target acquired by at least one imaging sensor, a plurality of target element images corresponding to at least some of the plurality of target elements, including said at least one target element from said first surface, and said at least one target element from said second surface; and
- determining the measurements relating to the object based on a spatial orientation of the optical target identified from the target element images and the geometric and spatial configuration of the target elements.

11. The method of claim 10 wherein said target elements are arranged in known geometric and spatial configurations relative to each other.

12. The method of claim 10 further including the step of determining the geometric and spatial configurations of the target elements on the optical target surfaces from said detected plurality of target element images prior to determining the measurements relating to the object.

13. The method of claim 12 wherein said plurality of target element images are detected from a plurality of two-dimensional images of the optical target acquired by at least one imaging sensor, said optical target images representative of at least two different rotational positions of the optical target.

14. An improved machine vision vehicle wheel alignment system having a processing unit and at least one imaging sensor for acquiring images, the improvement comprising:

- a single non-planar target having a plurality of visible features, said non-planar target removably secured against a vehicle wheel assembly surface within a field of view of the imaging sensor;
- wherein the processing unit is configured to receive data from the imaging sensor which is representative of said visible features of said single non-planar target; and
- wherein the processing unit is configured to determine at least an axis of rotation of the vehicle wheel utilizing said received data.

15. The improved machine vision vehicle wheel alignment system of claim 14 wherein said data is representative of said visible features in at least two different rotational positions about said axis of rotation of the vehicle wheel.

16. The improved machine vision vehicle wheel alignment system of claim 14 wherein the processing unit is configured to identify an intersection point between said axis of rotation of the vehicle wheel and said non-planar target.

17. The improved machine vision vehicle wheel alignment system of claim 14 wherein said visible features of said single non-planar target are disposed on a plurality of angled surfaces.

18. An improved machine vision vehicle wheel alignment system having a processing unit and at least one imaging sensor for acquiring images, the improvement comprising:

- a non-planar target having a plurality of visible features, said non-planar target removably secured against a vehicle wheel assembly surface within a field of view of the imaging sensor;
- wherein said visible features of said non-planar target are disposed on at least one curved surface;
- wherein the processing unit is configured to receive data from the imaging sensor which is representative of said visible features; and
- wherein the processing unit is configured to determine at least an axis of rotation of the vehicle wheel utilizing said received data.