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(54) **ADAPTABLE PROGRAMMING GUIDE FOR NETWORKED DEVICES**

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(57) **ABSTRACT**

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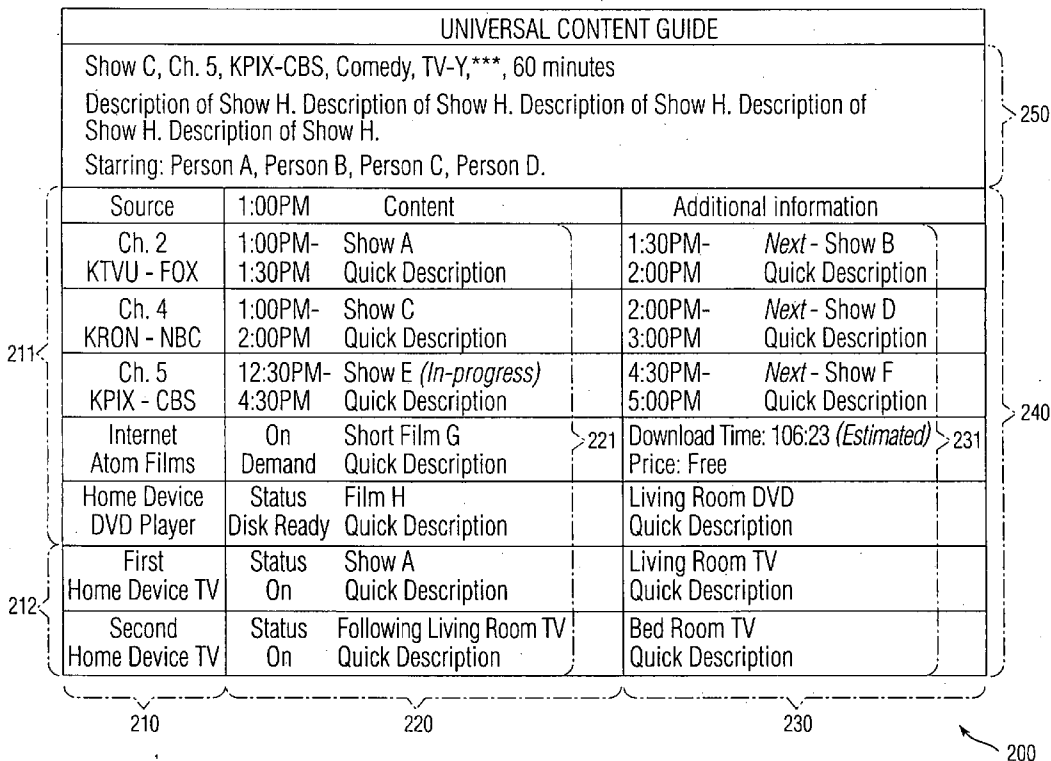
An electronic content guide is disclosed. The electronic content guide preferably includes a source field for listing content sources and output devices. The electronic content guide also includes a first content field for listing schedule data corresponding to first content data presently available for viewing from each one of the content sources and for listing display information corresponding to the first content data being displayed for viewing at a present time by each one of the output devices. Preferably, the source field and the first content field are displayable in parallel columns. The electronic content guide can also include a second content field, displayable in a column parallel to the source field and the first content field, corresponding to a second content data. In one embodiment, the first content data from each content source can be displayed simultaneously on more than one of the output devices.

(22) Filed: **Jul. 21, 2006**

**Related U.S. Application Data**

(63) Continuation-in-part of application No. 10/846,096, filed on May 14, 2004, and which is a continuation-in-part of application No. 10/000,495, filed on Oct. 30, 2001, and which is a continuation-in-part of application No. 09/909,676, filed on Jul. 19, 2001.

(60) Provisional application No. 60/470,748, filed on May 14, 2003. Provisional application No. 60/244,790, filed on Oct. 31, 2000. Provisional application No.



100

110

ON-SCREEN PROGRAMMING GUIDE			
Channel	1:00PM	1:30PM	2:00PM
Ch. 2 KTVU - FOX	Show A		Show B
Ch. 4 KTVU - FOX	Show D	Show E	Show F
Ch. 5 KPIX - CBS	Show G		Show H
Ch. 7 KGO - ABC	Show J		
Ch. 8 ESPN	Show L	Show M	Show N
Comedy, TV-Y ***, 60 minutes Description of Show H. Description of Show H. Description of Show H. Starring: Person A, Person B, Person C, Person D.			

140

(PRIOR ART)

Fig. 1

UNIVERSAL CONTENT GUIDE			
Show C, Ch. 5, KPIX-CBS, Comedy, TV-Y,***, 60 minutes Description of Show H. Description of Show H. Description of Show H. Description of Show H. Show H. Description of Show H. Starring: Person A, Person B, Person C, Person D.			
Source	1:00PM	Content	Additional information
Ch. 2 KTVU - FOX	1:00PM-	Show A	1:30PM- Next - Show B
	1:30PM	Quick Description	2:00PM Quick Description
Ch. 4 KRON - NBC	1:00PM-	Show C	2:00PM- Next - Show D
	2:00PM	Quick Description	3:00PM Quick Description
Ch. 5 KPIX - CBS	12:30PM-	Show E ( <i>In-progress</i> )	4:30PM- Next - Show F
	4:30PM	Quick Description	5:00PM Quick Description
Internet Atom Films	On Demand	Short Film G Quick Description	Download Time: 106:23 ( <i>Estimated</i> ) Price: Free
Home Device DVD Player	Status Disk Ready	Film H Quick Description	Living Room DVD Quick Description
First Home Device TV	Status On	Show A Quick Description	Living Room TV Quick Description
Second Home Device TV	Status On	Following Living Room TV Quick Description	Bed Room TV Quick Description

Fig. 2

Source	Content	Additional Info
HBO™ on demand	on demand Movie A	Description running time
HBO™ on demand	on demand Movie B	Description running time
HBO™ on demand	on demand Movie C	Description running time
"	"	"
"	"	"
"	"	"
"	"	"
"	"	"
"	"	"

Fig. 3

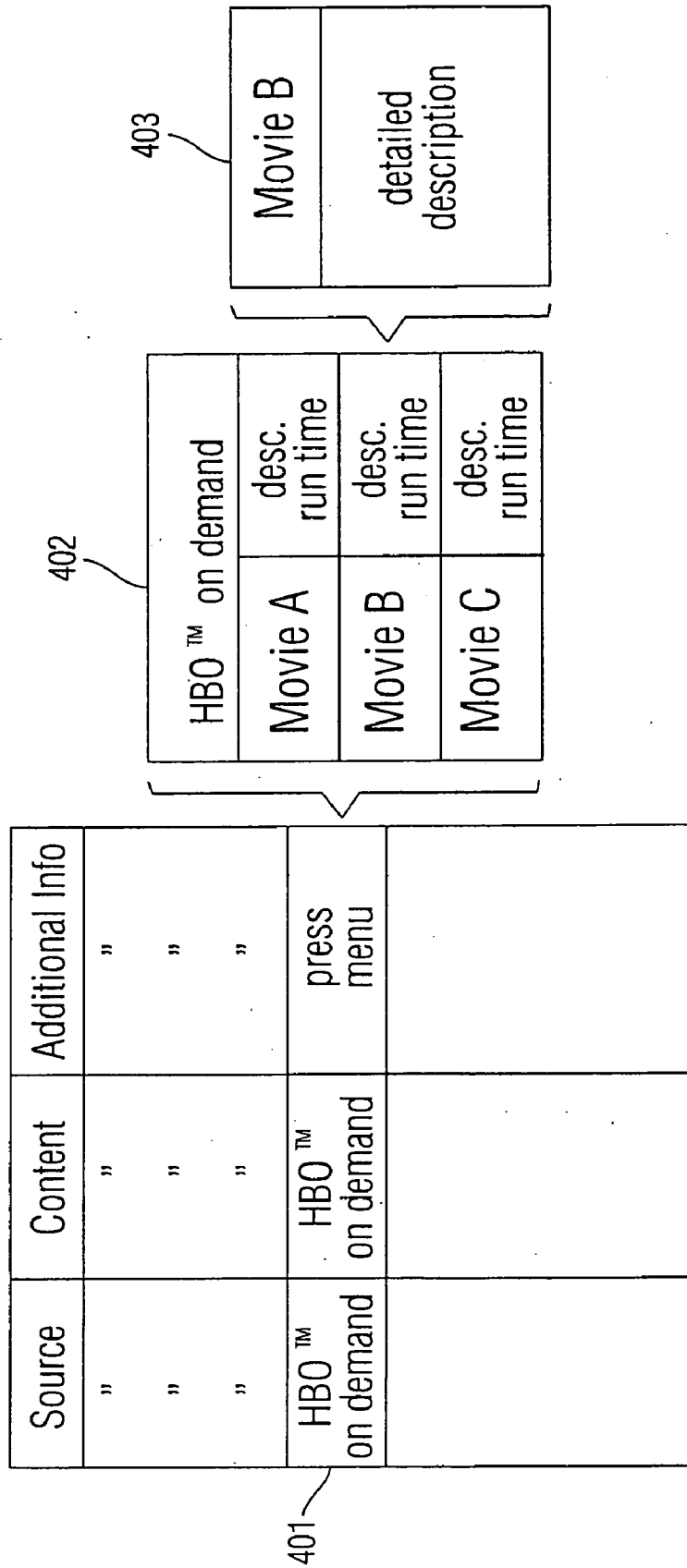


Fig. 4

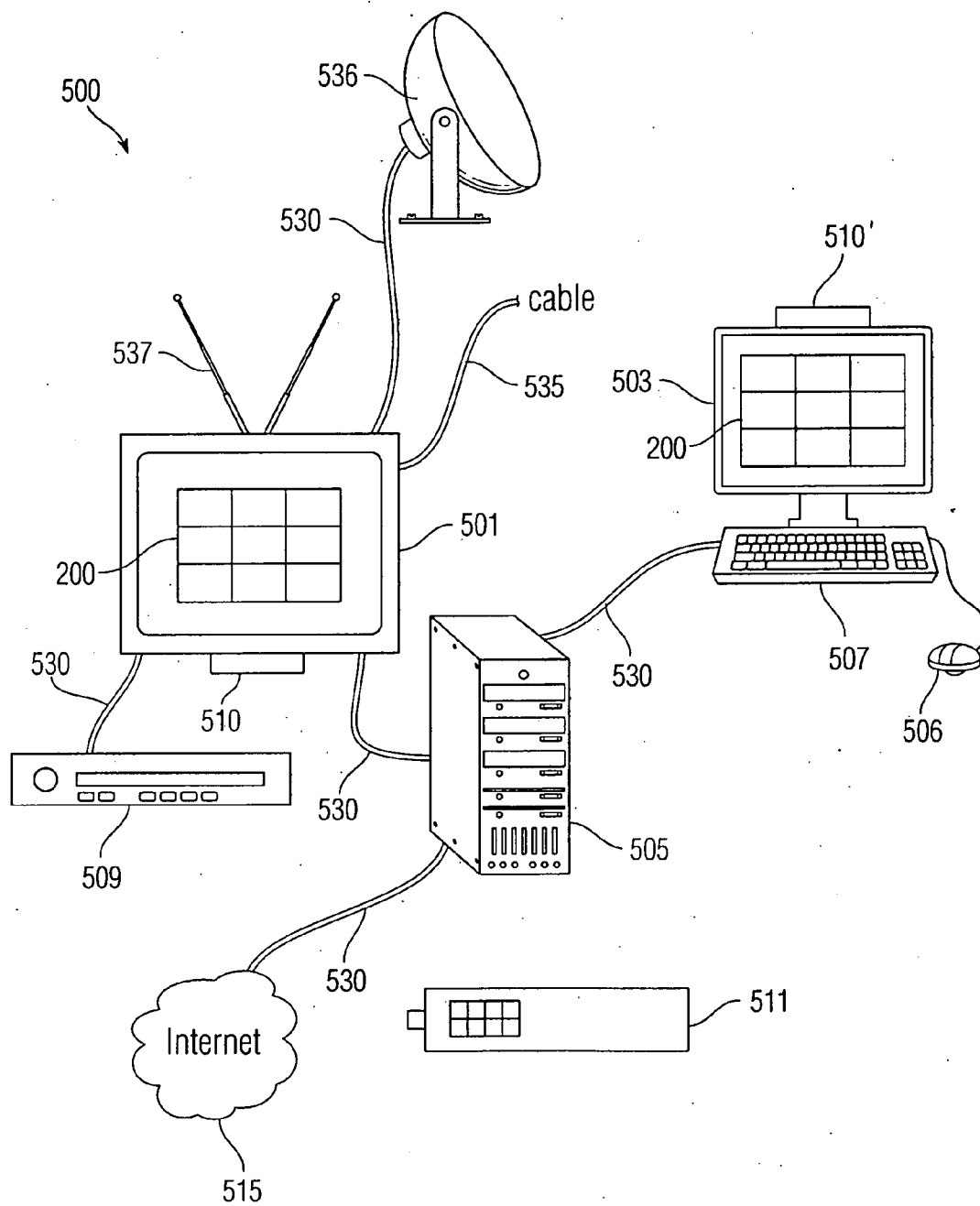


Fig. 5

**ADAPTABLE PROGRAMMING GUIDE FOR NETWORKED DEVICES**

RELATED APPLICATION(S)

[0001] This application is a continuation in part of U.S. patent application Ser. No. 10/846,096 filed on May 14, 2004, which in turn claims the benefit under 35 USC 119(e) of U.S. provisional patent application Ser. No. 60/470,748 filed May 14, 2003 and is a continuation in part of Ser. No. 10/000,495 filed Oct. 30, 2001, which in turn claims the benefit under 35 USC 119(e) of U.S. provisional patent application Ser. No. 60/244,790 filed Oct. 31, 2000 and is a continuation-in-part of U.S. patent application Ser. No. 09/909,676 filed on Jul. 19, 2001, which in turn claims the benefit under 35 USC 119(e) of U.S. provisional application Ser. No. 60/233,581 filed Sep. 19, 2000, as well as U.S. provisional application Ser. No. 60/219,857 filed on Jul. 20, 2000, all of which are incorporated by reference into the present application.

FIELD OF THE INVENTION

[0002] The present invention relates to systems for and methods of distributing content data. More specifically, this invention relates to an apparatus and method of formatting an on-screen programming guide that is adaptable to both a variety of content sources and output devices.

BACKGROUND OF THE INVENTION

[0003] Conventional media services provide scheduled programs on viewing devices, such as a television set. Standard broadcast services provide channels that can be received by virtually any television tuner through an antenna connector. At the same time, cable services typically offer packages of preselected channels to the consumers and that required a decoder at the television tuner or on the cable line at an external location. Cable services continuously broadcast scheduled programming through a pre-selected set of channels which are received through a cable connector on a television set. There are also a number of pay-per-view services that allow consumers to receive premium program transmissions through the cable network. Other available services include satellite programming services that provide a service similar to that provided by cable services. Some cable or satellite services allow consumers to select on demand pay-per view-programs from a set of available programs.

[0004] With the number of available TV channels increasing, the viewer has a wide range of programs from which to choose. Search and selection of desired programming for a consumer can be time consuming. Channel surfing is no longer fast enough to allow getting an overview of all channels. Daily newspapers and other paper publications have long provided channel listings, often using a grid format that shows what programs are on what channel at what time. However, the amount of TV programs typically exceed the limits of what can reasonably be printed. Further, a newspaper or other publication is not always available to the viewer when the viewer decides to watch television. Attempting to meet this problem of information overload and changing requirements, set-top boxes and televisions with integrated electronic program guides ("EPGs") have emerged.

[0005] Electronic program guides are on-screen guides or programming schedules that provide program listings for channels that are broadcast or provided by a cable system. Prior art electronic program guides offer online searching through program listings and schedules by genre, title or data. When a television viewer uses such a schedule, the viewer can find a program of interest, identify the channel, and enter the number into a remote control device.

[0006] One such prior art electronic program guide is shown in FIG. 1. The prior art guide 100 includes a list of channels 110, a time schedule 120, a grid display 130 of programs, and a description section 140 for conveying additional text information about the programs. The programs are displayed consecutively for each channel in the form of a grid. The prior art guide 100, however, is deficient for many reasons. The prior art guide 100 typically includes content from only a single content provider (i.e. a broadcast television network having a predetermined schedule). Thus, the prior art guide 100 does not provide the viewer with the capability of, or comprehensive information about, purchasing or receiving pay-per-view events, on demand programming, streaming media content off the Internet, accessing content from two or more providers at the same guide, or accessing content from consumer electronic devices such as DVD players and VCRs. The prior art guide 100 also has a static time range and can only display shows within that time range. As shown in FIG. 1, the time schedule 120 displays two hours of schedule information. In the case of a two-hour movie, the viewer is not provided with any information as to what program will appear immediately following the two-hour movie. The viewer is also left with the burden of navigating through the guide by scrolling back and forth. In addition, the prior art guide 100 does not provide display information showing where, for example, a selected program is being played. For example, in a modem home entertainment system where the viewer can play a DVD located in the family room on a television located in a bedroom, the prior art guide 100 does not have the capability of visually displaying what content is being displayed by what output device.

[0007] What is needed is an electronic programming guide that is adaptable to various sources of content such as scheduled-based broadcast content, digitally stream-able on-demand multimedia content, and controllable consumer electronic devices. What is also needed is a programming guide that includes both the sources of content available to a user as well as any output device or devices for displaying the content sources.

SUMMARY OF THE INVENTION

[0008] The present invention provides an electronic programming guide that is adaptable to various sources of content such as scheduled-based broadcast content, digitally stream-able on-demand multimedia content, and controllable consumer electronic devices. In accordance with a preferred embodiment, the programming guide of the present invention can include both the sources of content available to a user as well as any output device or devices for displaying the content sources. The present invention further provides a system and method for implementing the electronic programming guide.

[0009] In accordance with one embodiment of the present invention, an electronic content guide is disclosed. The

electronic content guide comprises a source field for listing content sources and output devices; and a first content field for listing schedule data corresponding to first content data presently available for viewing from each one of the content sources and for listing display information corresponding to the first content data being displayed for viewing at a present time by each one of the output devices.

[0010] Preferably, the source field and the first content field are displayable in parallel columns. The content sources can include at least one of: scheduled broadcast content; non-scheduled broadcast content; and consumer source devices. The scheduled broadcast content can include, for example: a network station, a cable channel, a satellite-based channel, and a pay-per-view channel, or a scheduled digital network broadcast (such as a scheduled internet broadcast). The non-scheduled content can include, for example: on-demand programming, streaming media content, and downloadable media files. The consumer source devices can include at least one of: a DVD player, a television tuner, a VCR, a PVR, an MP3 player, a digital video recorder, a PDA, a gaming system, a cellular telephone, and a computer.

[0011] Preferably, the electronic content guide includes content data from at least two distinct content providers. However, the content data of the different content providers is not presented separately, but effectively merged in a single table in the schedule. Therefore, the difference between the various content providers is not readily apparent to the user.

[0012] Preferably, the first content data corresponding to the scheduled broadcast content comprise a program title and a corresponding program time. Preferably, the first content data corresponding to the non-scheduled content comprise a program title and an indication of availability (such as, for example, an indication that content is available on demand). Preferably, the first content data corresponding to the consumer source device comprise a program title and a status identifier. Preferably, the first content data corresponding to the output devices comprise a program title and a status identifier. Alternatively, the first content data corresponding to the output devices comprise the location of a different output device which is being "followed" by the present output device. The output devices can include at least one of: a stereo speaker, a computer monitor, a computer speaker, a display device, a network media player, a gaming system, and/or a storage device.

[0013] The electronic content guide can further include a second content field, displayable in a column parallel to the source field and the first content field, corresponding to a second content data. Preferably, the second content data corresponding to the scheduled broadcast content can comprise a program title that is immediately available for viewing from the content sources after completion of the presently available first content data, wherein the program title includes a corresponding program time. Preferably, the second content data corresponding to the non-scheduled content comprises a download time and a download or viewing fee, progress of download, download speed, and/or messages relating to download (such as network outage messages). The second content data corresponding to non-scheduled content may periodically switch its display between two or more of the above listed indications. Preferably, the second content data corresponding to the con-

sumer source devices comprise a physical location of the consumer source devices. Preferably, the second content data corresponding to the output devices comprise a physical location of the output devices where the first content data are being displayed. The electronic content guide can further include a descriptor field for displaying a detailed description of each content source, each output device, the first content data, and the second content data.

[0014] In accordance with another embodiment of the present invention, an electronic content guide is disclosed. The electronic content guide includes a source field for listing content sources and output devices. The electronic content guide also includes a first content field for listing schedule data corresponding to first content data presently available for viewing from the content sources and for listing display information corresponding to the first content data being displayed for viewing at a present time by the output devices. The electronic content guide further includes a second content field for listing schedule data corresponding to second content data that are immediately available for viewing from the content sources after completion of the presently available first content data and for listing locations of the output devices where the first content data are being displayed. Preferably, the source field, the first content field and the second content field are displayable in parallel columns. The electronic content guide can also include a descriptor field for displaying a detailed description of each content source, each output device, the first content data, and the second content data.

[0015] In accordance with another embodiment of the present invention, an electronic content guide is disclosed. The electronic content guide includes a source field for listing content sources and output devices; and a first content field for listing schedule data corresponding to first content data presently available for viewing from the content sources and for listing display information corresponding to the first content data being displayed for viewing at a present time by each one of the output devices; wherein the first content data from each content source can be displayed simultaneously on more than one of the output devices. The electronic content guide can also include a second content field, displayable in a column parallel to the source field and the first content field, corresponding to a second content data. The electronic content guide can also include a descriptor field for displaying a detailed description of each content source, each output device, the first content data, and the second content data.

[0016] A consumer source device, or a non-scheduled content source may be a multiple item content source. A multiple item content source may be presented in the schedule as multiple content sources, or as a single content source, wherein additional menus are used to select a particular item.

[0017] The present electronic programming guide may also offer a search function which would allow a user to search for a particular item of content.

[0018] Because of the presence of multiple content sources, multiple instances of the same content item may be available at the same time from different sources. The present invention may rank these multiple versions according to applicable factors. The rankings may be used to choose the display order of the multiple versions, or whether some versions are displayed at all.



## BRIEF DESCRIPTION OF THE DRAWINGS

[0019] **FIG. 1** shows a prior art on-screen programming guide for listing content providers and corresponding program availabilities.

[0020] **FIG. 2** shows an on-screen programming guide adaptable for listing multiple content source providers, including source listings, content listings and availabilities, and output devices for displaying the media content, in accordance with the present invention.

[0021] **FIG. 3** shows a first embodiment for the representation of a multiple item content source.

[0022] **FIG. 4** shows a second embodiment for the representation of a multiple item content source.

[0023] **FIG. 5** is a schematic diagram of a system for implementing embodiments of the present invention.

## DETAILED DESCRIPTION OF A PREFERRED EMBODIMENT

[0024] **FIG. 2** shows an on-screen programming guide adaptable for listing multiple content source providers, including source listings, content listings and availabilities, and output devices for displaying the media content, in accordance with one embodiment of the present invention.

[0025] A content source provider is an entity that provides content to the user. Thus, a content source provider may be a cable service, a satellite dish service, a broadcast TV tower emitting a plurality of TV channels available over the air, or a digital network. A content source is a single source of content, such as a Television channel, or a website or server available over the digital network. A content source provider usually provides multiple content sources.

[0026] Digital devices, such as DVD, VCR, players, attachable hard-drives, MP3 players, game systems, etc. may be considered both content source providers and content sources. In other words, a DVD player is a content source provider that includes a single content source—the DVD player itself.

[0027] The guide **200** comprises multiple entries, with each entry representing one of plurality of rows. The entries describe a number of content sources **211** and output devices **212** within a source field **210**. The guide **200** also includes a first content field **220** for listing schedule data corresponding to first content data **221** presently available for viewing from the content sources **211** and for listing display information corresponding to the first content data **221** being displayed for viewing at a present time by the output devices **212**. The guide **200** can further include a second content field **230** for listing schedule data corresponding to second content data **231** that are immediately available for viewing from the content sources **211** after completion of the presently available first content data **221** and for listing locations of the output devices **212** where the first content data **221** are being displayed. The second content field **230** can also include download and pricing information, if applicable, for the content sources **221**. The second content field can even include source location information, if applicable, for the content sources **221**. Preferably, the source field **210**, the first content field **220** and the second content field **230** are all displayable in parallel columns with each other using a grid format **240**. The guide **200** can also include a descriptor field

**250** for displaying a detailed description of each content source **211**, each output device **212**, the first content data **221** and the second content data **231**.

[0028] The content sources **211** within the source field **210** can comprise scheduled broadcast content, non-scheduled content, and consumer source devices. The scheduled broadcast content can include at least one of: a network station, a cable channel, a satellite-based channel, and a pay-per-view channel. The non-scheduled content can include at least one of: on-demand programming, streaming media content, and downloadable multimedia files. The consumer source devices can include at least one of: a DVD player, a VCR, a PVR, an MP3 Player, a digital video recorder, a television tuner, a PDA, a cellular telephone, a gaming system, and a computer. For example, the content sources **211** within the source field **210** comprise the network stations Ch. 2 KTVU-FOX, Ch. 4 KRON-NBC, Ch. 5 KPIX-CBS; the downloadable file from the Internet (Atom Films); and the consumer source device Home Device DVD player. Other content sources can also be included within the source field **210**.

[0029] The output devices **212** within the source field **210** can include at least one of: a television, a stereo speaker, a computer monitor, a computer speaker, a display device, a network media player, a gaming system, and a storage device. For example, the output devices **212** within the source field **210** comprise two Home Device Televisions. In one embodiment, the televisions display content from any one of the content sources **211**.

[0030] In accordance with one embodiment of the present invention, the first content data **221** corresponding to the scheduled broadcast content comprise a program title and a corresponding program time. For example, within the first content field **220** an entry for Show A is listed as being available from Ch. 2 KTVU-FOX. The Show A has a start time of 1:00 PM and a finish time of 1:30 PM. Also, within the first content field **220** an entry for Show C is listed as being available from Ch. 4 KRON-NBC. The Show C has a start time of 1:00 PM and a finish time of 2:00 PM. Further, within the first content field **220** an entry for Show E is listed as being available from Ch. 5 KPIX-CBS. The Show E has a start time of 12:30 PM and a finish time of 4:30 PM.

[0031] In accordance with one embodiment of the present invention, the first content data **221** corresponding to the non-scheduled content comprise a program title and an indication of availability. For example, within the first content field **220** an entry for Short Film G is listed as being available from the Internet. The Short Film G's indication of availability is "on demand", thus it has no program start time.

[0032] In accordance with one embodiment of the present invention, the first content data **221** corresponding to the consumer source devices comprise a program title and a status identifier. For example, within the first content field **220** an entry for Film H is listed as being available from the Home Device DVD Player. In this example, the Film H is recorded on a DVD. As mentioned above, the consumer source device listed on the guide **200** can be any consumer source device, such as a VCR, PVR, an MP3 player, television tuner, a digital video recorder, a PDA, a cellular telephone or computer that displays its content on an output device such as a television.

[0033] In accordance with one embodiment of the present invention, the first content data **221** corresponding to the

output devices comprise a program title and a status identifier. For example, within the first content field **220** an entry for Show A is listed as being sent to and displayed by a first Home Device television. The entry for Show A also lists the first television as being “on” next to “Status”. Thus, the guide **200** lists Show A as being displayed on the first television, which is “on”. Also, within the first content field **220** an entry for Living Room TV is listed as being available from a second Home Device television. However, as will be explained more fully below in connection with the second content field **230**, the Living Room TV is actually the first television and the second television is a Bedroom TV. In this example, as the guide **200** shows, the Living Room TV is watching the Show A, and the Bedroom TV is watching what the Living Room TV is watching; in other words, the Bedroom TV is following the Living Room TV. Thus, Show A is being displayed on both the first television (Living Room TV) and the second television (Bedroom TV).

[**0034**] In accordance with another embodiment of the present invention and as mentioned above, the second content field **230**, which is displayable in a column parallel to the source field **210** and the first content field **220**, corresponds to the second content data **231**. In one embodiment, the second content data **231** corresponding to the scheduled broadcast content comprise a program title that is immediately available for viewing from the content sources **211** after completion of the presently available first content data **221**. The program title of the scheduled broadcast content includes a corresponding program time. For example, within second content field **230** a Show B is listed as being available from the Ch. 2 KTVU-FOX immediately following completion of the Show A. The Show B has a start time of 1:30 PM and a finish time of 2:00 PM. Also, within the second content field **230** a Show D is listed as being available from the Ch. 4 KRON-NBC immediately following completion of the Show C. The Show D has a start time of 2:00 PM and a finish time of 3:00 PM. Further, within the second content field **230** a Show F is listed as being available from the Ch. 5 KPIX-CBS immediately following completion of the Show E. The Show F has a start time of 4:30 PM and a finish time of 5:00 PM. Unlike the grid format of the prior art guide **100** which has a static time range and can only display programs within that time range, the guide **200** of the present invention shows what program is next available following the completion of the presently available program no matter what time the next program comes on. In the **FIG. 2**, this is shown on the rows whose sources are Ch. 2 KTVU-FOX, Ch. 4 KRON-NBC, and Ch. 5 KPIX-CBS.

[**0035**] In one embodiment of the present invention, the second content data **231** corresponding to the non-scheduled content comprise a download time and a download or viewing fee, if applicable. For example, the Short Film G listed in the first content field **220** has a download time of 1:06:23 (estimated) and no download or viewing fee, which are listed in the second content field **230**. In addition, the second content data of Short Film G may include download progress, download speed, and/or messages relating to download (such as network outage messages). The second content data may change periodically between two or more of the above listed indications.

[**0036**] In one embodiment of the present invention, the second content data **231** corresponding to the consumer source devices comprise a physical location of the consumer

source devices. For example, the Home Device DVD Player listed under the source field **210** is physically located in the Living Room under the second content field **230**. Thus, a viewer using the guide **200** can realize that the Home Device DVD Player, which has loaded the DVD Film H, is actually the DVD Player located in the living room.

[**0037**] In one embodiment of the present invention, the second content data corresponding to the output devices comprise a physical location of the output devices where the first content data are being displayed. For example, within the second content field **230**, an entry for Living Room TV and Bedroom TV are listed on the rows whose sources are First Home Device TV and Second Home Device TV, respectively. The First Home Device TV is actually the television located in the living room. Similarly, the Second Home Device TV is actually the television located in the bedroom. As shown on the guide **200**, the Living Room TV is presently playing Show A while the Bedroom TV is playing what the Living Room TV is playing, i.e. the Show A.

[**0038**] In another embodiment of the present invention, content referred to by the first content data from each content source **211** can be displayed simultaneously on more than one of the output devices **212**. This novel feature of the present invention allows, for example, two viewers, one located in the living room the other in the bedroom, to simultaneously view the same on-demand program listed in the first content field **220**. This feature is especially useful in home entertainment systems with multiple source devices and output devices all interconnected with one another.

[**0039**] In another embodiment of the present invention and still referring to **FIG. 2**, the guide **200** can include a descriptor field **250** for displaying a detailed description of each content source **211**, each output device **212**, the first content data **221**, and the second content data **231**. The descriptor field preferably comprises an area for listing more detailed information about each selected item. For example, the descriptor field **250** can include a detailed description of a television program selected and/or status information of an output device.

[**0040**] Preferably, the electronic content guide includes content data from at least two distinct content source providers. Therefore, the content guide may include content data from two different cable services, or a cable service and a satellite service. Thus, for example, the ‘Ch. 2 KTVU-FOX’ content source may be provided by a cable service, while the ‘Ch. 5 KPIX-CBS’ content source may be provided by a satellite service. However, the content sources of the different content source providers are not visually or functionally segregated at the schedule. In other words, the present invention preferably combines the content sources **211** into a single universal schedule (or Universal Content Guide) and not into several distinct schedules each associated with a respective content provider.

[**0041**] Thus, the Universal Content Guide as shown in **FIG. 2** creates an overall impression that the content sources are in fact all a part of a single content source provider. The universal guide may provide some indication of which content source provider each content source belongs to. For example, the Universal Content Guide may show a sign or an icon which indicates if ‘Ch. 5 KPIX-CBS’ (for example) is provided by a traditional broadcast, cable or satellite

service. However, since the content is not necessarily organized by content source provider, specific knowledge of the various content source providers is not required for a user to be able to browse the Universal Content Guide or utilize the search functionality.

[0042] A non-scheduled content source may be a multiple item content source. In other words, it may simultaneously offer multiple items of content. Examples of such sources include an Internet server, which offers multiple items of content, or an on-demand service which includes multiple TV-shows, or movies, etc. A consumer source device may also be a multiple item content source. An example may be a multiple disk DVD player, a high capacity storage device, with multiple items of content loaded thereon, or a PVR with multiple items of content loaded thereon.

[0043] FIG. 3 shows a multiple item content source according to another embodiment of the present invention. As shown in FIG. 3, the multiple item content source may be presented in the schedule as multiple content sources, each content source corresponding to a single item of the multiple item content source. For example, a single multiple item content source—HBO on demand™—offers a plurality of items, such as movies A, B and C. The movies are represented as different records 301, 302, and 303, respectively and thus they appear as different content sources.

[0044] FIG. 4 shows a multiple item content source in accordance with yet another embodiment of the present invention. According to this embodiment, the multiple item content source may be represented as a single content source. In this case, additional menus allow choosing a specific item from the content source. Thus, upon selecting record 401, a user will be presented with an additional menu 402 that shows the multiple items of the multiple item content source. Upon selecting an item from the additional menu, the user may be presented with yet another menu 403 showing detailed information about a particular item as well as allowing the user to view that item.

[0045] The present electronic programming guide may also offer a search function which would allow a user to search for a particular content. The search may be based on the name of a particular piece of content, the name of the source of the content, or a description of the content, or other metadata. The search function may encompass each item of a multiple item content source, regardless of which embodiment is used to display these items. Thus, if the second embodiment is used and the specific items of a multiple item content source are thus 'hidden' from the top level schedule, the search function may be used to access these items even if the name of the content source is not known.

[0046] Due to the possible presence of multiple content source providers, multiple instances of the same content item may be available at the same time from different sources. For example, if the content sources include both a cable and a satellite TV input, two instances of the same channel may be offered by the satellite and cable systems respectively. Alternatively, the same movie or other program may be offered by two different channels, or by a channel, and a DVD placed within a DVD drive, or by a channel and an internet content provider, etc. If that is the case, the present invention may rank the multiple instances of the same content according to predefined criteria. The highest ranked instance may be listed at a relatively high place in the

schedule. The other instances may be listed at the end of the schedule, or they may not be listed at all. This would remove clutter and make the schedule easier to navigate.

[0047] An indication may be shown at the representation of the highest ranked instance to alert the user that additional instances are available. The user may be shown a menu of the additional instances if he/she selects the indication.

[0048] A content guide in accordance of the present invention may rank the instances according to various different criteria. For example, in accordance with one embodiment, technical criteria may be used to rank the listing. Technical criteria may include the suitability of a particular version of content to be displayed on an output device (such as a TV set) the user is viewing. Thus, the pixel or color resolution, the media encoding format, the aspect ratio may indicate different levels of compatibility between the various versions of the content and the output device. Thus the version of the content which is most compatible with the output device would be ranked highest.

[0049] It should be noted that various incompatibilities between certain version of content and an output device may be resolved by reprocessing the content. For example, aspect ratio incompatibilities may be resolved by adding 'black bands', the content may be converted to a compatible format and resolutions may be upgraded and downgraded. Nevertheless, it is preferable that when multiple versions of content are available the version which is the most compatible with the output device is selected. This is the case because resolving the various compatibilities often degrades the quality of content. For example, content which is upgraded to a higher resolution usually is of worse quality than content which was originally sampled (e.g., filmed) at the higher resolution.

[0050] In addition to technical criteria, preference criteria may be used. Preference criteria refer not to technical compatibilities but to the preferences of the user. Preference criteria may include, whether viewing the content requires additional payment, whether viewing the content requires waiting for a download, the language in which the content is presented, the availability of subtitles or closed captioning, whether the content is presented in its original version or whether it has been cut or altered, whether the content may be paused while viewing, and whether viewing a particular version of the content would engage a device which could be otherwise useful for other purposes.

[0051] The user may select which criteria are to be used and how much weight each criteria is to be given. Computer devices implementing embodiments of the present invention compute the ranking of the various versions of a particular piece of content according to the thus selected criteria.

[0052] In an alternative embodiment, the present invention may not reorder content sources in the schedule according to their ranking. Instead it may automatically switch the source of a particular content item the user has selected with a higher ranked version of that same content item available from another content source. Thus, for example, if a user selects a sports game from the NBC channel, and the same sports game is available in high definition at the NBC (HD) channel, and the user has a High Definition Television set compatible with the NBC (HD) channel, the present invention may automatically switch the user's Television to the NBC (HD) channel.

[0053] In yet another alternative embodiment, the present invention may not rank repeating content sources at all. Instead it may treat all content sources that include the same content at a certain time as being essentially identical. In this embodiment, multiple content sources that provide the same content at the same time are shown as single generic content source. If the user selects the generic content source, the underlying system may select which one of the multiple content sources to display based on algorithms designed to optimize internal system resources, such as the tuning capacity, or the network bandwidth of the system. In an alternative embodiment, the present system may rank repeating sources but it may also include an optimization factor in the rankings, the optimization factor indicating how much benefit a particular source would have on the overall efficiency of use of system resources, such as tuners, bandwidth, etc.

[0054] FIG. 5 is a diagram of an example system for implementing the various embodiments of the present invention. The schedule utilized in the instant invention is preferably an electronic program schedule 200 that is displayable on an electronic device, such as a television screen 501 or computer screen 503. The schedule 200 may be supported through a computer 505 which hosts the hardware and software to support and display the program schedule 200 on the screens 501 and/or 503. A user is preferably capable of selecting a program from the program availabilities listed on the schedule 200 with a suitable control device including a mouse 506, a key board, 507 and/or an infrared remote control 511. The monitors can be equipped with infrared sensors 510 and/or 510' that are responsive to commands from the infrared remote control 511. Alternatively, the computer 505 may be equipped with an interface for the remote control. Furthermore, the computer may be equipped with infrared transmitters with which it may control the television 501.

[0055] Still referring to FIG. 5, a local area network 530 preferably couples the computer 505 with media playing appliances, such as a VCR player and/or a DVD player 509 as well as other content source providers, such as cable service 535, satellite service 536, or ordinary broadcast signal receiver 537. These content source providers may also be connected to the TV set through ordinary means (e.g. various coaxial and audio visual cables). The computer 505 is also preferably coupled to the internet 515 through a suitable connection, such that selected on-demand programs are capable of being transmitted to the computer 505 from a remote server via the internet. The television 501 can also be coupled to program providers through a cable network 535 to receive scheduled programs listed on the program schedule 200.

[0056] In a preferred method of the instant invention the electronic program schedule 200 is generated from a list of user preferences. User preferences can include, but are not limited to selected content source providers, user likes, user dislikes, criteria for selection of content when multiple versions are available and/or user availabilities. A distribution network provides a link between a user location and a remote server which stores the user preferences and the electronic program schedule in a user account. The user can access his/her account through the network to view the schedule and/or modify the account to generate an updated program schedule. In another embodiment of the instant

invention, the program schedule is automatically updated. For example, the system and network can be configured to automatically update the program schedule based on the user's habits, such as automatically added programs selected from previous version of the user's schedule.

[0057] The computer 505 can be a central hub for content data distribution. The computer 505 monitors content data availabilities from the content source providers and organizes the program availabilities into customized program schedules. The computer preferably includes a memory and a generally programmable central processing unit (CPU). The memory includes instructions which when executed by the CPU realize the functionality discussed above. The computer may be an embedded device.

[0058] The present invention can be supported with any number of network architectures, hardware and software. Therefore, the present invention has been described in terms of specific embodiments incorporating details to facilitate the understanding of the principles of construction and operation of the invention. Such reference herein to specific embodiments and details thereof is not intended to limit the scope of the claims appended hereto. It will be apparent to those skilled in the art that modifications can be made in the embodiment chosen for illustration without departing from the spirit and scope of the invention.

What we claim:

1. A system for providing an improved universal schedule comprising:

- a programming server operatively coupled to an output device and a plurality of content source providers and comprising a CPU and a memory, the memory further comprising executable instructions which when executed by the CPU cause the server to send signals to the output device, the signals being operative to:

- display a universal content guide; and

- display a plurality of entries in the universal content guide, wherein each entry is associated with and describes a content source available from one of the plurality of content source providers, wherein content sources from at least two different content source providers are described by the entries.

2. The system of claim 1, wherein the entries are not grouped according to the content source providers their associated content sources are available from.

3. The system of claim 2, wherein the memory further includes instructions which cause the computer to:

- receive a communication from a user which indicates that one of the entries is selected by the user; and

- cause the output device to play the content source associated with the selected entry.

4. The system of claim 2, wherein the memory further includes instructions which cause the computer to:

- receive a communication from a user which indicates that one of the entries is selected by the user;

- find the content source associated with that entry;

- identify the content being currently presented by that content source;

search other content sources for different instances of said content, in order to obtain a set of plurality of instances of said content;

apply one or more criteria to the set of instances of said content;

identify an instance of said content that satisfies the one or more criteria to the highest degree; and

cause the output device to play the identified instance of said content.

5. The system of claim 4, wherein the one or more criteria are selected from the group comprising: pixel resolution, color resolution, media encoding format, aspect ratio, payment requirements, download requirements, language, availability of subtitles or closed captioning, alteration of content from its original version, ability to pause content while viewing, and an optimization factor.

6. The system of claim 1, wherein at least one of the plurality of content source providers is chosen from the group consisting of: a cable service, a satellite service, a free broadcast service, a DVD player, a VCR player, an MP3 player, a mass storage device, and a network based video on demand service.

7. The system of claim 6, wherein at least one of the plurality of content source providers is an Internet server.

8. The system of claim 6, wherein at least two of the multiple content source providers each provide multiple content sources, each content source of the multiple content sources being a television channel.

9. The system of claim 1, wherein a multiple item content source is available from at least one of the content source providers, the multiple item content source comprising a plurality of items of content which are all available on demand.

10. The system of claim 9, wherein the memory comprises further executable instructions which when executed by the CPU cause the computer to send signals to the output device, the signals being operative to:

display a second plurality of entries in the universal content guide, wherein each entry is associated with and describes a content item available from the multiple item content source.

11. The system of claim 9, wherein the memory comprises further executable instructions which when executed by the CPU cause the computer to send signals to the output device, the signals being operative to:

display an additional single entry in the universal content guide, the additional single entry being associated with the multiple item content source;

receive a communication from a user indicating the user's selection of the additional entry; and

display an additional menu showing a plurality of second records respectively associated with each content item comprised by the multiple item content source.

12. The system of claim 11, wherein the memory comprises further executable instructions which when executed by the CPU cause the computer to send signals to the output device, the signals being operative to:

receive a communication from the user indicating that the user has selected one of the plurality of second records; and

cause the output device to play the content item associated with the selected record.

13. The system of claim 1, wherein the memory comprises further executable instructions which when executed by the CPU cause the computer to send signals to the output device, the signals being operative to:

find a set of content sources available from the plurality of content source providers, the set of content sources presenting the same content item at the same time,

apply one or more criteria to the content sources of the set of content sources to obtain an individual ranking for each content source, and

modify the display of plurality of entries for the content sources of the set of content sources in the universal content guide, the modification being based on the individual rankings of the content sources.

14. The system of claim 13, wherein the plurality of entries for the content sources of the set of content sources are displayed in descending order of their individual rankings.

15. The system of claim 13, wherein a set of repeating content sources include the same content item available at the same time, and the modification of the display includes removing all but one or more of the highest ranked of the set of repeating content sources.

16. The system of claim 13, wherein the one or more criteria are selected from the group comprising: pixel resolution, color resolution, media encoding format, aspect ratio, payment requirements, download requirements, language, availability of subtitles or closed captioning, alteration of content from its original version, ability to pause content while viewing, and an optimization factor.

17. A method for providing an improved universal schedule comprising the steps of:

displaying a universal content guide at the output device; and

displaying a plurality of entries in the universal content guide, wherein each entry is associated with and describes a content source available from one of a plurality of content source providers,

wherein content sources from at least two different content source providers are described by the entries.

18. The method of claim 17, wherein the entries are not grouped according to the content source providers their associated content sources are available from.

19. The method of claim 18, further including the steps of:

receiving a communication from a user which indicates that one of the entries is selected by the user; and

causing the output device to play the content source associated with the selected entry.

20. The method of claim 18, further comprising the steps of:

receiving a communication from a user indicating that one of the entries is selected by the user;

finding the content source associated with that entry;

identifying the content being currently presented by that content source;

searching other content sources for different instances of said content, in order to obtain a set of plurality of instances of said content;

applying one or more criteria to the set of instances of said content;

identifying an instance of said content that satisfies the one or more criteria to the highest degree; and

causing the output device to play the identified instance of said content.

21. The method of claim 20, wherein the one or more criteria are selected from the group comprising: pixel resolution, color resolution, media encoding format, aspect ratio, payment requirements, download requirements, language, availability of subtitles or closed captioning, alteration of content from its original version, ability to pause content while viewing, and an optimization factor.

22. The method of claim 17, wherein at least one of the plurality of content source providers is chosen from the group consisting of: a cable service, a satellite service, a free broadcast service, a DVD player, a VCR player, an MP3 player, a mass storage device, and a network based video on demand service.

23. The method of claim 22, wherein at least one of the plurality of content source providers is an Internet server.

24. The method of claim 18, wherein at least two of the plurality of content source providers each provide multiple content sources, each content source of the multiple content sources being a television channel.

25. The method of claim 17, wherein a multiple item content source is available from at least one of the content source providers, the multiple item content source comprising a plurality of items of content which are all available on demand.

26. The method of claim 25, further comprising the step of:

displaying a second plurality of entries in the universal content guide, wherein each entry is associated with and describes a content item available from the multiple item content source.

27. The method of claim 25, further comprising the steps of:

displaying an additional single entry in the universal content guide, the additional single entry being associated with the multiple item content source;

receiving a communication from a user indicating the user's selection of the additional single entry; and

displaying an additional menu showing a plurality of second records respectively associated with each content item comprised by the multiple item content source.

28. The method of claim 27, further comprising the steps of:

receiving a communication from the user indicating that the user has selected one of the plurality of second records; and

causing the output device to play the content item associated with the selected record.

29. The method of claim 17, further including the steps of:

finding a set of content sources available from the plurality of content source providers, the plurality of content sources presenting the same content item at the same time,

applying one or more criteria to the content sources of the set of content sources to obtain an individual ranking for each content source, and

modifying the display of plurality of entries for the content sources of the set of content sources in the universal content guide, the modification being based on the individual rankings of the content sources.

30. The method of claim 29, wherein the plurality of entries for the content sources of the set of content sources are displayed in descending order of their individual rankings.

31. The method of claim 29, wherein a set of repeating content sources include the same content item available at the same time, and the modification of the display includes removing all but the highest ranked of the set of repeating content sources.

32. The method of claim 29, wherein the one or more criteria are selected from the group comprising: pixel resolution, color resolution, media encoding format, aspect ratio, payment requirements, download requirements, language, availability of subtitles or closed captioning, alteration of content from its original version, ability to pause content while viewing, and an optimization factor.

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