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(54) **METHOD AND APPARATUS FOR  
MULTI-USER AWARENESS AND  
COLLABORATION**

(57) **ABSTRACT**

(76) Inventor: **RICHARD N. BURRIDGE,**  
**REDWOOD CITY, CA (US)**

Correspondence Address:  
**THE HECKER LAW GROUP  
1925 CENTURY PARK EAST  
SUITE 2300  
LOS ANGELES, CA 90067 (US)**

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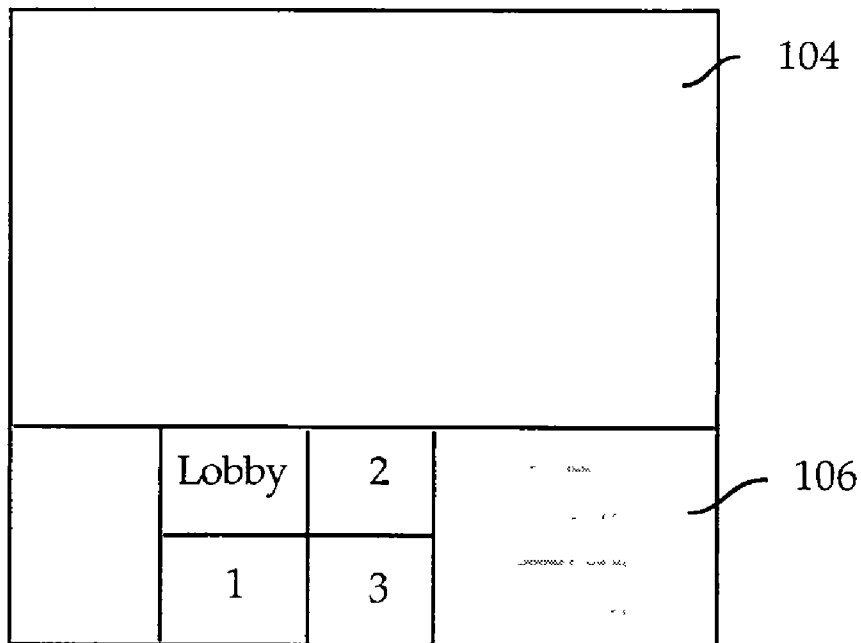
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In embodiments of the present invention incorporate a facility to make a user, or client, aware of other users that are currently viewing the same Web, or display page. Functionality is provided in a browser to allow a user to initiate a collaboration operation with other users on the same Web page. A user provides user information to a registry via a registration process. The registry is further updated to include an entry identifying the page that is currently being viewed by a user. The user can access a collaboration interface to view a list of users that are currently viewing the same page as the user. The collaboration interface further allows the user to select a collaboration operation to collaborate with one or more users that are currently viewing the same page. In embodiments of the invention, the collaboration interface is generated by a Java applet and is contained within a portion of any general-purpose or special-purpose browser. The collaboration interface accepts input entered within an input field of the interface and processes it accordingly. A request to change Web pages updates the registry to reflect the new page. If the input is a request to initiate a collaborative operation, the collaboration interface initiates the operation.

102



108

102

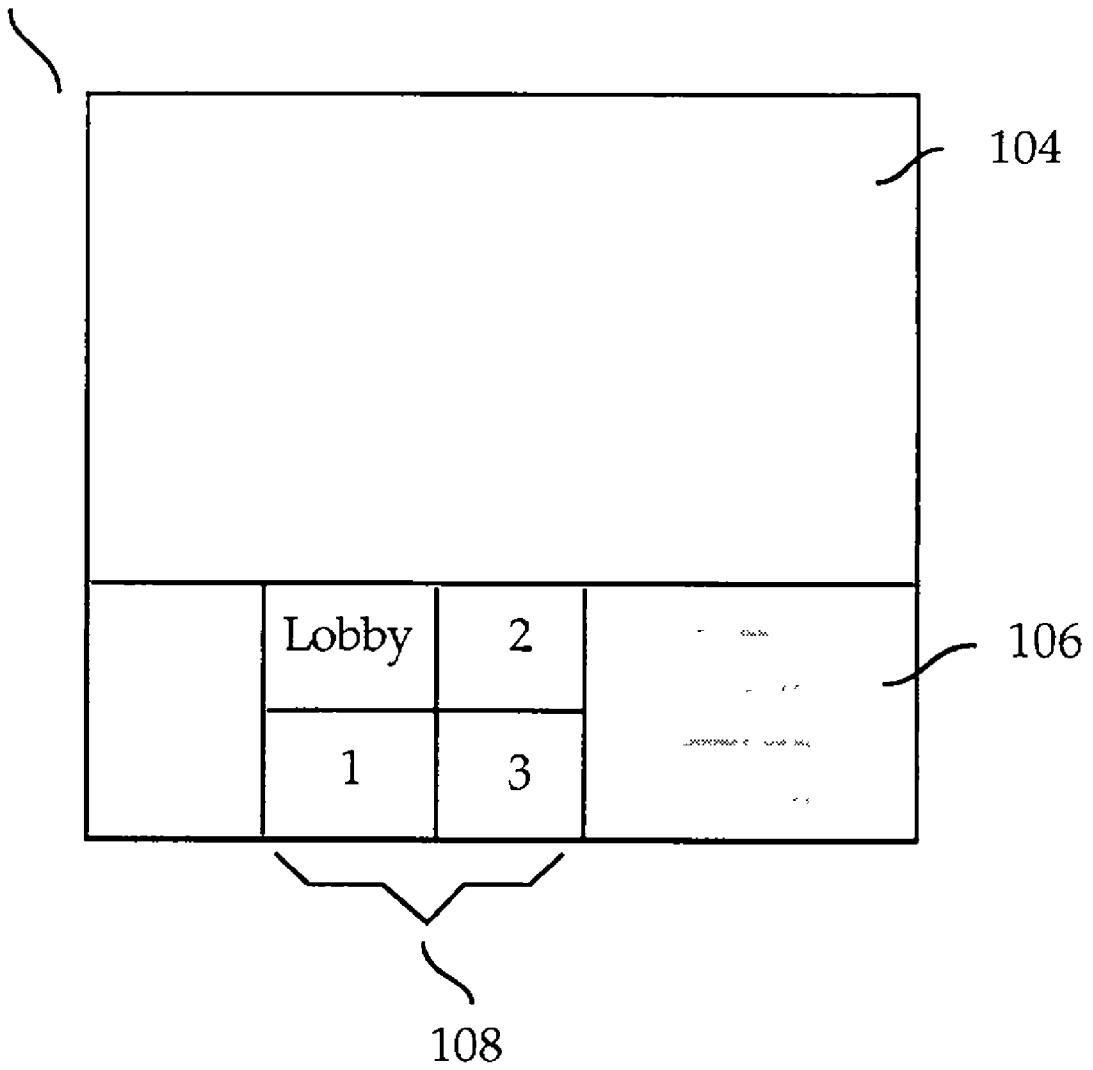
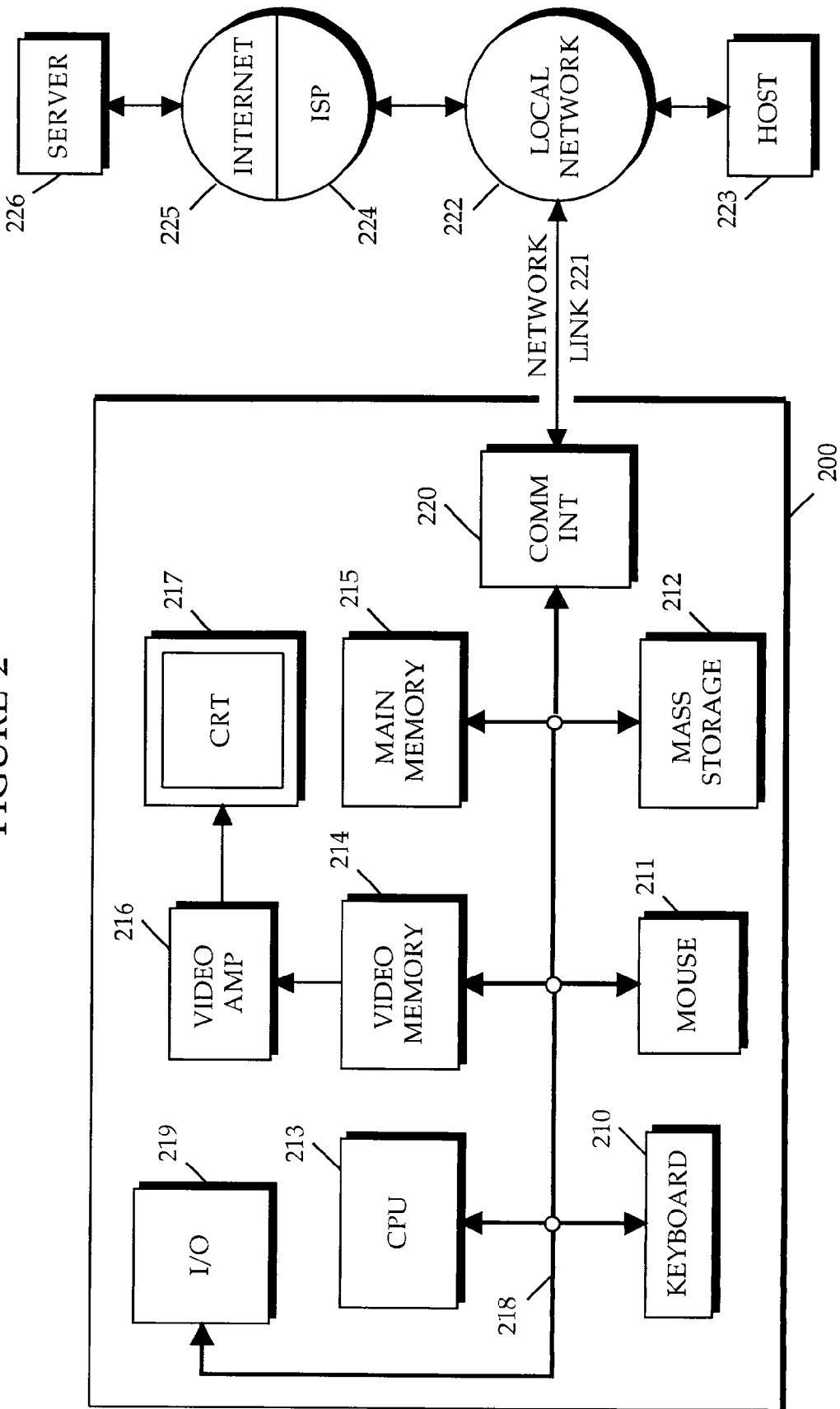


Figure 1

FIGURE 2



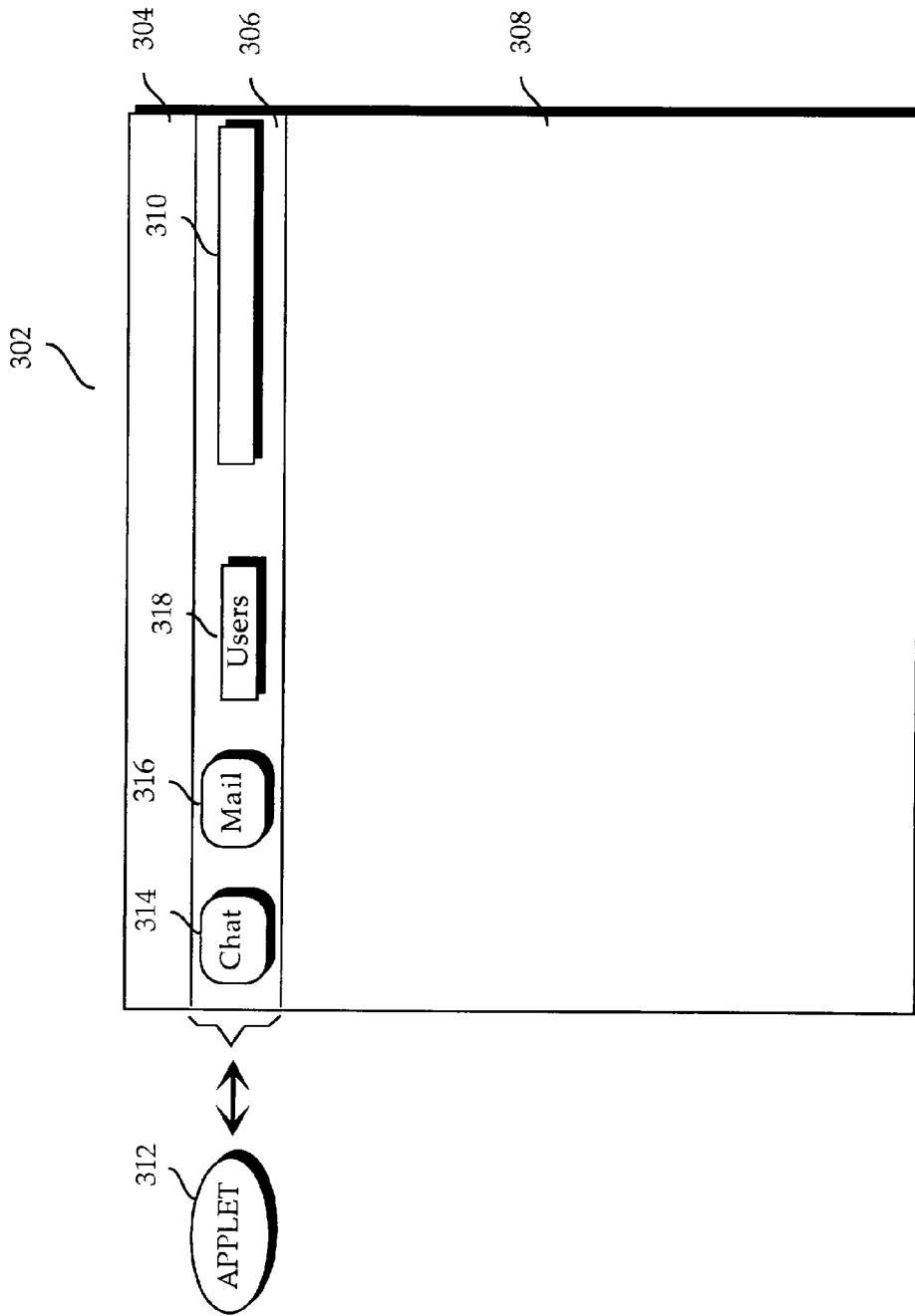


Figure 3

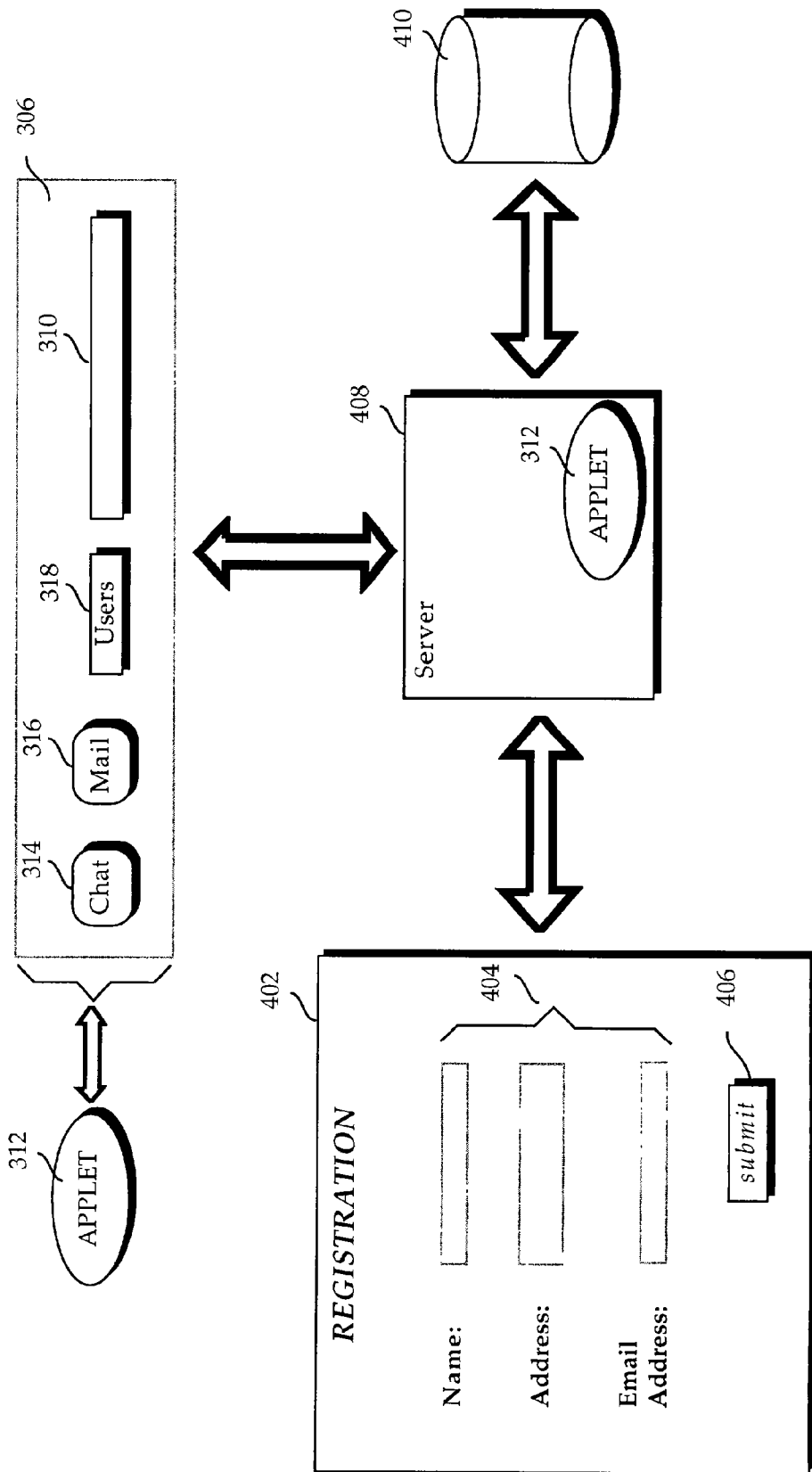


Figure 4

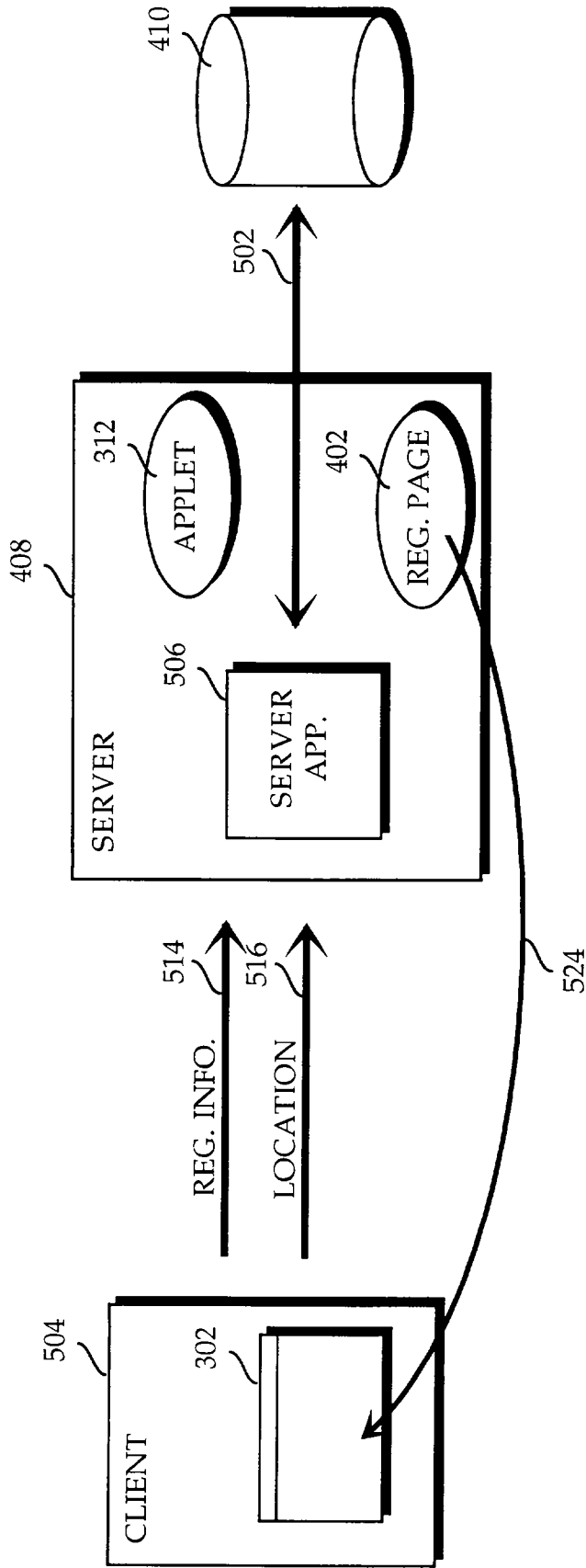


Figure 5A

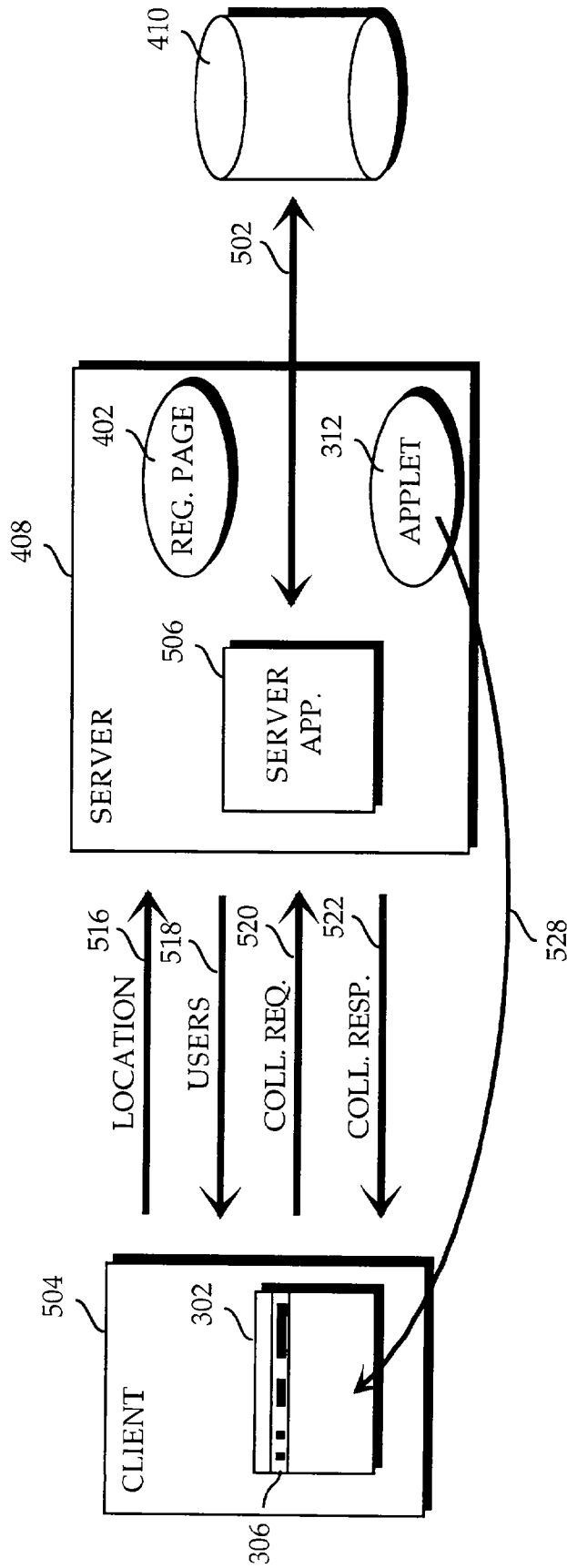


Figure 5B

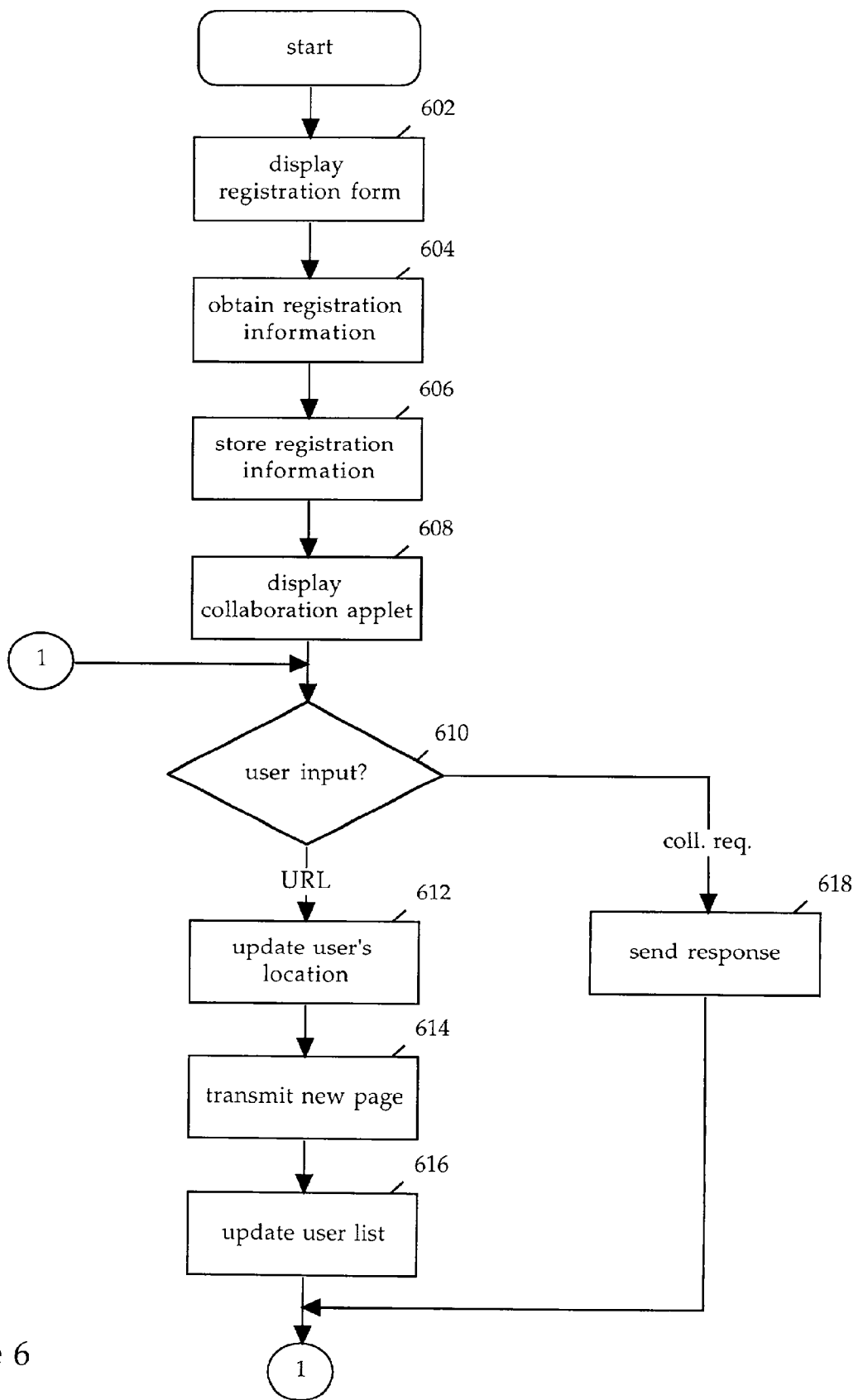


Figure 6



## METHOD AND APPARATUS FOR MULTI-USER AWARENESS AND COLLABORATION

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### BACKGROUND OF THE INVENTION

[0002] This invention relates to computer systems, and more particularly to collaboration between users of computer systems.

[0003] Computers can be interconnected via a local area network (LAN), a wide area network (WAN) and/or the Internet, for example. In a typical network, a computer that runs client software is a client computer, or client. A computer that runs server software is a server computer, or server. The server provides resources that can be accessed and shared by client computer users on the network based on requests that are sent to the server by a user.

[0004] Initially, users worked independently of other users. However, it has become desirable for users to share, or collaborate, in the development and review of information. For example, users may wish to view changes (e.g., simultaneously with the changes) and make updates to a graphic presentation. However, the client software that is widely used to access the Internet does not allow users to collaborate (i.e., is not collaborative-aware). As this software can also be used in an internal network configuration (i.e., an Intranet), it would be desirable for the software to allow user collaboration.

[0005] A user typically accesses the Internet using a software package referred to as a browser. A browser provides a graphic user interface (GUI) for displaying pages of information that a server sends to the client via the Internet. A page, or Web page, is typically defined using Hypertext Markup Language (HTML) statements that specify the pages GUI elements. A browser parses the HTML statements to generate and display the Web page in the browser's display area. The browser further provides a mechanism for the user to input information and/or submit a request which the browser forwards, via the Internet, to the appropriate Internet server. When a response is received at the user's computer, the browser parses the response (e.g., an HTML document that defines a Web page).

[0006] There is currently no interaction available between users that are viewing pages in a general-purpose browser. It is not possible, for example, to determine the identity of other users currently viewing the same page. If a user was aware that a second user is also viewing the same page, the user might want to interact with the other user, perhaps

regarding the page that they both are viewing. For example, users may wish to converse with each other using an electronic mail (email) application or chat software.

[0007] Email and chat software allow a user to send messages to other users over the Internet, for example. The message is received by a server and forwarded to the recipient. To chat with another user, a user must run client chat software and interact with a chat server that interprets chat commands. Where, for example, a chat command requests that a message be sent to another chat participant, the chat server forwards the message to the intended recipient.

[0008] One example of a chat environment is the "www.geocities.com" chat environment. To begin chatting, a user must first enter the requested user information (i.e., a name) and then select a chat category from a set of pre-determined categories (e.g., "Arts & Literature" and "Entertainment") and a room ("Athens", "Broadway" and "Paris") from a set of pre-determined rooms within the selected chat category. The chat environment user can move between rooms by selecting another of the pre-determined rooms within the selected category. Within each room, the user can see a list of users within that room and a list of all of the users within the selected category.

[0009] In the chat environment (e.g., the "www.geocities.com" chat environment), the user is limited to a predetermined set of categories and chat rooms within each of the categories. It is not possible for the user to exit the chat environment such that the user's chat environment name follows the user to another environment (e.g., the "www.yahoo.com" Web site). To enter another chat environment, a user must first enter the requested information at the new environment.

[0010] General-purpose browsers do not identify those users that are concurrently viewing Web pages. That is, it is currently not possible to use a general-purpose browser software application to identify concurrent users of a Web page for collaboration.

[0011] There are special-purpose browsers that have been developed for a collaborative environment. Users that wish to collaborate must use one of these special-purpose browsers. There are obvious disadvantages to using a special-purpose browser particularly given that the majority of Internet users run one of the popular general-purpose browsers (e.g., Netscape's Navigator, Communicator, etc. or Microsoft's Internet Explorer).

[0012] FIG. 1 provides an example of a special-purpose browser developed by PlaceWare, Inc., Mountain View, Calif. Browser 102 consists of areas 104, 106 and 108. Area 104 displays HTML-defined Web pages. Area 108 provides a list of collaborative-application rooms, or Web pages. One of the "Lobby", "1", "2" and "3" icons in area 108 can be selected by the user to display a collaborative-application room. The Web pages that are associated with "Lobby", "1", "2" and "3" support a specific collaboration application. The Web page is displayed in area 104. Area 106 contains a list of users that are currently viewing the page that is being displayed in area 104.

[0013] Collaboration is limited to one of the specific collaboration applications represented by the "Lobby", "1", "2" and "3" icons. That is, to be able to view the user list in

area **106** and to collaborate with a user in the user list, it is necessary in browser **102** to access one of the “Lobby”, “1”, “2” and “3” collaboration application Web pages. It is not possible, for example, to collaborate with another user that is viewing another Web page (e.g., a non-collaboration Web page). For example, browser **102** does not identify the users that are viewing the “www.yahoo.com” Web page.

[**0014**] Another special-purpose browser approach, provided in a product called WebCanal by Inria (France’s National Institute for Research in Computer Science & Control), requires that one browser be the master browser and all of the other browsers be slave browsers. When the master browser changes Web pages, the slave browsers’ Web page is changed to reflect the master browser’s Web page. Thus, the master browser controls what the slave browsers view. The slave browser does not navigate through Web pages independent of the master browser.

#### SUMMARY OF THE INVENTION

[**0015**] Embodiments of the present invention incorporate a facility to make a user aware of other users that are currently viewing the same browser page within any general or special-purpose browser. Functionality is also provided in the browser to allow a user to initiate a collaboration operation with other users on the same Web page.

[**0016**] A user provides user information to a registry via a registration process. The registry retains the information supplied by the user. The registry is further updated to identify the page that is currently being viewed by a user. The user can access a collaboration interface to view a list of users that are currently viewing the same page as the user. The collaboration interface further allows the user to select a collaboration operation to collaborate with one or more users that are currently viewing the same page.

[**0017**] In embodiments of the invention, the collaboration interface is contained within a portion of the browser. The collaboration interface is implemented as an application program (e.g., an applet) that can run in any of the currently available browsers (e.g., any general-purpose or special-purpose browser). The collaboration interface accepts input entered within an input field of the interface and processes it accordingly. A request to change pages causes the registry to be updated to reflect the new page. The new page is displayed within a window (e.g., a frame) within the browser window. If the input is a request to initiate a collaborative operation, the collaboration interface initiates the operation.

[**0018**] During the registration process, a user provides registration information that is stored in the registry. For example, the user can supply a name, address and email address that is stored in the registry. Other information can be used as a supplement and/or replacement for this information. The collaboration applet, the page that contains the applet is sent back to user’s browser. The applet is initiated on the user’s computer and the applet’s interface is displayed within the browser.

[**0019**] The applet interface includes an area for specifying a new page. For example, the user can identify a new page by supplying the page’s uniform resource locator (URL).

#### BRIEF DESCRIPTION OF THE DRAWINGS

[**0020**] **FIG. 1** provides an example of special-purpose browser environment.

[**0021**] **FIG. 2** provides an example of an embodiment of a computer execution environment suitable for executing embodiments of the invention.

[**0022**] **FIG. 3** provides an example of a browser that includes a collaboration interface according to an embodiment of the invention.

[**0023**] **FIG. 4** illustrates GUI interfaces and interactions with a server and registry according to one or more embodiments of the invention.

[**0024**] **FIGS. 5A-5B** provide examples of the information flow between a collaboration user and a server according to an embodiment of the invention.

[**0025**] **FIG. 6** provides a process flow for multi-user awareness and collaboration according to one embodiment of the invention.

#### DETAILED DESCRIPTION OF THE INVENTION

[**0026**] A method and apparatus for multi-user awareness and collaboration is described. In the following description, numerous specific details are set forth in order to provide a more thorough description of the present invention. It will be apparent, however, to one skilled in the art, that the present invention may be practiced without these specific details. In other instances, well-known features have not been described in detail so as not to obscure the invention.

[**0027**] Embodiment of Computer Execution Environment (Hardware)

[**0028**] An embodiment of the invention can be implemented as computer software in the form of computer readable program code executed on a general-purpose computer such as computer **200** illustrated in **FIG. 2**. A keyboard **210** and mouse **211** are coupled to a bi-directional system bus **218**. The keyboard and mouse are for introducing user input to the computer system and communicating that user input to processor **213**. Other suitable input devices may be used in addition to, or in place of, the mouse **211** and keyboard **210**. I/O (input/output) unit **219** coupled to bi-directional system bus **218** represents such I/O elements as a printer, A/V (audio/video) I/O, etc.

[**0029**] Computer **200** includes a video memory **214**, main memory **215** and mass storage **212**, all coupled to bi-directional system bus **218** along with keyboard **210**, mouse **211** and processor **213**. The mass storage **212** may include both fixed and removable media, such as magnetic, optical or magnetic optical storage systems or any other available mass storage technology. Bus **218** may contain, for example, thirty-two address lines for addressing video memory **214** or main memory **215**. The system bus **218** also includes, for example, a 32-bit data bus for transferring data between and among the components, such as processor **213**, main memory **215**, video memory **214** and mass storage **212**. Alternatively, multiplex data/address lines may be used instead of separate data and address lines.

[**0030**] In one embodiment of the invention, the processor **213** is a microprocessor manufactured by Motorola, such as the 680X0 processor or a microprocessor manufactured by Intel, such as the 80X86, or Pentium processor, or a SPARC microprocessor from Sun Microsystems, Inc. However, any other suitable microprocessor or microcomputer may be

utilized. Main memory **215** is comprised of dynamic random access memory (DRAM). Video memory **214** is a dual-ported video random access memory. One port of the video memory **214** is coupled to video amplifier **216**. The video amplifier **216** is used to drive the cathode ray tube (CRT) raster monitor **217**. Video amplifier **216** is well known in the art and may be implemented by any suitable apparatus. This circuitry converts pixel data stored in video memory **214** to a raster signal suitable for use by monitor **217**. Monitor **217** is a type of monitor suitable for displaying graphic images.

[**0031**] Computer **200** may also include a communication interface **220** coupled to bus **218**. Communication interface **220** provides a two-way data communication coupling via a network link **221** to a local network **222**. For example, if communication interface **220** is an integrated services digital network (ISDN) card or a modem, communication interface **220** provides a data communication connection to the corresponding type of telephone line, which comprises part of network link **221**. If communication interface **220** is a local area network (LAN) card, communication interface **220** provides a data communication connection via network link **221** to a compatible LAN. Wireless links are also possible. In any such implementation, communication interface **220** sends and receives electrical, electromagnetic or optical signals which carry digital data streams representing various types of information.

[**0032**] Network link **221** typically provides data communication through one or more networks to other data devices. For example, network link **221** may provide a connection through local network **222** to host computer **223** or to data equipment operated by an Internet Service Provider (ISP) **224**. ISP **224** in turn provides data communication services through the world wide packet data communication network now commonly referred to as the "Internet" **225**. Local network **222** and Internet **225** both use electrical, electromagnetic or optical signals which carry digital data streams. The signals through the various networks and the signals on network link **221** and through communication interface **220**, which carry the digital data to and from computer **200**, are exemplary forms of carrier waves transporting the information.

[**0033**] Computer **200** can send messages and receive data, including program code, through the network(s), network link **221**, and communication interface **220**. In the Internet example, server **226** might transmit a requested code for an application program through Internet **225**, ISP **224**, local network **222** and communication interface **220**. In accord with the invention, one such downloaded application is the method and apparatus for multi-user awareness and collaboration described herein.

[**0034**] The received code may be executed by processor **213** as it is received, and/or stored in mass storage **212**, or other non-volatile storage for later execution. In this manner, computer **200** may obtain application code by way of a carrier wave.

[**0035**] Application code may be embodied in any form of computer program product. A computer program product comprises a medium configured to store or transport computer readable code, or in which computer readable code may be embedded. Some examples of computer program products are CD-ROM disks, ROM cards, floppy disks, magnetic tapes, computer hard drives, servers on a network, and carrier waves.

[**0036**] The computer system described above is for purposes of example only. An embodiment of the invention may be implemented in any type of computer system or programming or processing environment including, but not limited to, an embedded system.

[**0037**] Browser Environment

[**0038**] Embodiments of the invention are implemented as a software program that runs within any general-purpose or special-purpose browser software program (e.g., Netscape's Navigator and Microsoft's Internet Explorer). In one embodiment of the invention the software program is comprised of a collaboration applet written in the Java programming language.

[**0039**] The Java programming language can be used to develop platform-independent programs. That is, programs that can run on multiple hardware and software platforms. A compiler is used to translate the high level program statements into platform-independent machine code. A Java virtual machine that includes a compiler or other translator executing on a specific platform translates the platform-independent machine code into platform specific machine code. It should be apparent that embodiments of the invention can be implemented using any programming language in addition to the Java programming language. However, it is beneficial to implement platform-independent program code.

[**0040**] The collaboration applet captures the viewing location of registered users and includes an interface for selecting collaboration environments and/or collaboration operations. Using embodiments of the invention, a user can view a list of users that are currently viewing the same page. The user can choose one of the collaboration environments and/or collaboration operations within a collaboration environment.

[**0041**] Examples of collaboration environments include, but are not limited to, a chat room; electronic mail; a shared white board application, a text editing application, bug tracking and network games.

[**0042**] The shared white board environment allows a user viewing the white board to see the changes made by another user (e.g., a line drawn by one user is seen by the other user). Operations within a shared white board environment may include modifying or adding to the white board presentation.

[**0043**] In a text editing environment, a user can view a document to see the change(s) made by another user. A user might select operations to edit the document that is currently being viewed (and modified) by other users.

[**0044**] A shared bug tracking system allows users to view changes to software bug data (e.g., additions and status modifications). Users of the bug tracking system can select operations to add entries to the bug tracking system and make modifications to existing entries. Network gaming allows a user to play a game with other users.

[**0045**] FIG. 3 provides an example of a browser that includes a collaboration interface according to an embodiment of the invention. Browser **302** can be any general-purpose or special-purpose browser. Browser **302** can be Netscape's Communicator or Microsoft's Internet Explorer, for example. Browser **302** can also be a special-purpose browser that is capable of executing an applet (i.e., a

Java-enabled browser). The layout depicted in FIG. 3 is for the sake of an example only. It should be apparent that any layout can be used with embodiments of the invention.

[0046] Browser 302 includes section 308 for displaying output generated by browser 302 and applets running within browser 302. Thus, for example, browser 302 displays GUI elements defined by an HTML document in section 308. Further, section 308 can include output generated by an applet.

[0047] Browser 302 includes command section 304. Command section 304 can include buttons for "Back", "Forward", "Home", "Edit", "Reload", "Print" and "Find" operations, for example. Browser 302 displays a page of information that is defined by a Hypertext Markup Language (HTML) document that is retrieved from a computer site (e.g., a server) available via the Internet. One page can be designated as the user's home page. The "Home" button is used to return to the user's home page. The "Back", "Forward" buttons are used to display a previous or subsequent page of the current page. The "Reload" button reloads the current page. The "Print" button prints the displayed page. The "Find" button can be used to find a text string within the currently displayed page.

[0048] Collaboration applet 312 generates a graphical user interface (GUI) 306 that is displayed within browser 302. GUI 306 includes input field 310 that allows the user to specify a location or address of a Web page to display within section 308 of browser 302. The user typically specifies a Web page using a Uniform Resource Locator (URL). A URL identifies the server on which the Web page is located and the file (or files) that contains a definition for the Web page. The URL is one example of an identifier that can be used to locate information. However, it should be apparent that other identifiers can be used to locate information. For example, in a file system, a full pathname is used to identify the physical storage location of a file. The pathname identifies the name of the file and all of the directories that lead to a file. The full pathname typically specifies the drive and, in a client-server environment, server on which the file is located.

[0049] Collaboration applet 312 forwards the URL of the Web page requested by the user via the Internet to a server. The request is forwarded to the server identified in the URL where the request is processed and a response is transmitted back to the user's (i.e., client) computer. In addition, the URL is stored in an information repository by server-side software. The information repository therefore contains information to identify the Web page that is currently being viewed by a user.

[0050] In addition to input field 310, the collaboration applet generates GUI elements (e.g., pull-down menus and buttons) that allow the user to specify collaboration operations. For example, button 314 allows a user to request a chat operation. Collaboration applet 312 transmits the request to a server that can process the request. For example, the server can forward one or more pages and/or applets that allow the user to enter a chat with other collaboration users.

[0051] Button 316 provides another example of a collaboration operation that might be specified by the user using GUI 306 of collaboration applet 312. Button 316 allows a user to initiate a mail function for sending a mail message to another collaboration user.

[0052] Menu 318 is a pull-down menu that identifies the other users that are currently viewing the same page as the user. Thus, a user can open menu 318 to identify other collaboration users and then select a collaboration operation (e.g., chat button 314 or mail button 316) to interact with one or more of the collaboration users.

[0053] In one or more embodiments of the invention, the user undergoes a registration process during which the user enters user information in a client computer which is transmitted to a server for storage in a registry. Collaboration applet 306 is sent to the registered user's computer for execution in the browser running on the client computer. FIG. 4 illustrates GUI interfaces and interactions with a server and registry according to one or more embodiments of the invention.

[0054] Registration page 402 is displayed in section 308 of browser 302 on a user's computer display. The user can request registration page 402 in a manner typically such as a URL, for example. A collaboration server (e.g., server 408) responds to the request by transmitting a definition of registration page 402 (e.g., an HTML document) to browser 302. Browser 302 parses the definition and displays registration page 402. It should be apparent to one skilled in the art that registration page 402 can be modified to include additional or replacement information.

[0055] Illustratively, registration page 402 includes input fields 404 for entering information including user identification information. Input fields 404 include fields for identifying the user's name, address, and email address. The user selects submit button 406 to submit the registration information. Registration page 402 along with the information entered into registration page 402 is transmitted to server 408. Server 408 processes the registration information and stores it in repository 410. Repository 410 can be a database that is maintained by a database management system (DBMS) server, a flat file that is maintained by a file system, or any other type of persistent data storage medium.

[0056] It should be apparent that other registration techniques can be used in embodiments of the invention. For example, a cookie driven auto-registration technique can be used wherein user information stored on a client computer (e.g., a cookie) contains registration information. Server 408 can examine the stored information and retrieve the registration information in response to a request for registration. There is no need for the user to enter the registration information in registration page 402.

[0057] Collaboration applet 312 is transmitted to browser 302 and GUI 306 is displayed within browser 302. Input to collaboration applet 312 such as a collaboration operation selection or location specification is transmitted to server 408. Information entered into fields of GUI 306 can be transmitted to server 408 for storage in repository 410. Further, commands initiated by a user in GUI 306 can be sent to and processed by server 408.

[0058] Embodiments of the invention facilitate collaboration between users using the execution environment that each user has already adopted and to which each is familiar. That is, collaboration applet 312 can execute in any of the general-purpose or special-purpose browser software products. Users can collaborate using different browsers as well, for example. A user executing Netscape's Navigator on a

client computer can collaborate with another user whose computer is running Microsoft's Internet Explorer as well as a user that is using a special-purpose browser such as Inria's WebCanal.

[0059] A client computer's browser executing collaboration applet 312 may interact with one or more servers for registration and collaboration. The servers interact with the client computer to obtain registration information, download collaboration applet 312 and process input generated in collaboration applet 312.

[0060] It should be apparent that there can be more than one information repository. In one embodiment of the invention, a server maintains user registration and collaboration information for each user (e.g., each user of collaboration applet 312) that logs in to that server. The server's repository contains information that can be used to generate a list of users that are currently viewing a given Web page.

[0061] The information stored in multiple repositories (e.g., by multiple servers) can be merged to generate a complete set of user information. The merged information can be stored at a centralized site and forwarded to a server. The information can be forwarded to a server upon request, for example. When a server updates its registration information, it can forward the update(s) to the centralized site. Alternatively, a server can send updates to each server that has requested updates.

[0062] Collaboration applet 312 running in browser 302 transmits user information to a server that stores the information in repository 410. Further, collaboration applet 312 forwards collaboration requests to a server for processing a response. FIGS. 5A-5B provide examples of the information flow between a collaboration user's computer and a server according to an embodiment of the invention. In FIGS. 5A-5B, collaboration applet 312 is depicted on the same server as registration page 402 for the sake of simplicity. It should be apparent, however, that collaboration applet 312 and registration page 402 need not reside on the same server.

[0063] Referring to FIG. 5A, client system 504 is executing browser 302. A user of client system 504 requests registration page 402 from server 408. Server 408 processes the request and sends registration page 402 (via transmission 524) to browser 302. Browser 302 displays registration page 402 in, for example, section 308 of browser 302.

[0064] A user enters the registration information and presses the submit button (e.g., submit button 406). The registration information is transmitted (via transmission 514) from browser 302 on client computer 504 to server 408. Server application 506 running on server 408 receives the registration information and stores it in repository 410 (via transmission 502).

[0065] Referring to FIG. 5B, server 408 transmits collaboration applet 312 (via transmission 528) to client computer 504. Collaboration applet 312 executes on client computer 504 and generates GUI 306 which is displayed within browser 302 (e.g., as a frame within browser 302). The user can enter a URL or other location specification for a Web page in input field 310. The Web page request is transmitted (via transmission 516) to server 408. If the request cannot be satisfied by server 408 (e.g., the requested Web page is not resident on server 408), the request is forwarded over the Internet to the appropriate server which

returns the Web page document to client computer 504. Server application 506 can generate a list of collaboration users that are currently viewing the same Web page. The list of users is transmitted (via transmission 518) for display in GUI 306 in response to a selection of pull-down menu 318 of GUI 306.

[0066] A collaboration request is transmitted (via transmission 520) to server 408. A response to the collaboration request is transmitted (via transmission 522) to client computer 504 by server 408. If the collaboration request is directed to another server, server 408 can forward the request to the specified server for processing. A collaboration response can be, for example, a chat or email applet that allows a user to chat with, or send a message to, other collaboration users. Other examples of collaborative responses include applets, or application software, that allow a user to view and update information that is being shared and viewed by other users (e.g., a text-editing application).

[0067] In one or more embodiments of the invention, a user registers with a collaboration application running on a server. The server enters the information in repository 410. As the user navigates through the Internet using input field 310 in GUI 306 generated by collaboration applet 312, the collaboration application stores the navigational information in repository 410. The collaboration application examines the contents of one or more repositories to generate a list of users that are currently viewing the same page. The list is transmitted to client computer 504 for display in pull-down menu 318 in GUI 306. Thus, it is possible for a user to be aware of the users that are viewing the same page. Further, the user can make collaboration selections within GUI 306.

[0068] FIG. 6 provides a process flow for multi-user awareness and collaboration according to one embodiment of the invention. At step 602, a registration form is displayed in an area of the user's browser (e.g., section 308 of browser 302). Registration page 402 is sent to the user in response to a request entered by the user. The user can enter the URL for registration page 402, for example. Alternatively, the user can indicate in a preference setting of browser 306 that registration page 402 is the initial (or home) page. In this case, registration page 402 is automatically displayed when browser 302 is invoked or when the "Home" command is selected by the user.

[0069] Once registration page 402 is displayed in browser 302, the user can submit the registration information. At step 604, registration information is obtained from the user and, at step 606, the information is stored in a repository. Collaboration applet 312 is sent to the user. At step 608, GUI 306 of collaboration applet 312 is displayed in browser 302.

[0070] At step 610, a determination is made whether user input is received from collaboration applet 312. If user input is received in the form of a collaboration request, processing continues at step 618 to process and respond to the request. Processing continues at step 610 to process subsequent user input.

[0071] If user input is received in the form of a URL for a new Web page, processing continues at step 612 to update the repository to include the new Web page request from the user. The repository includes the new Web page information. The repository can further be used to store information that reflects a history of viewed pages.

[0072] At step 614, the new Web page is transmitted to client computer 504. At step 616, the list of users that are currently viewing the same Web page is updated. Alternatively, step 616 can be performed when the user selects pull-down menu 318 of GUI 306. Processing continues at step 610 to process subsequent input.

[0073] In one or more embodiments of the invention, a user can identify a user (e.g., a user listed in menu 318) to follow or chase. That is, the user can follow a second user as the second user changes to a new Web page. When the second user identifies a new Web page in input field 310, the first user is transitioned to the new Web page as well. The Web page definition for the new Web page is sent to both users. In this way, the first user views the Web page specified, and viewed, by the second user.

[0074] Thus, a method and apparatus for multi-user awareness and collaboration has been provided in conjunction with one or more specific embodiments. The invention is defined by the claims and their full scope of equivalents.

1. A method of user awareness and collaboration in a computer network environment, said method comprising the steps of:

retaining user information for a user of said network environment, said user information including a user identification;

executing within a computer system of said computer network a computer program configured to capture any address specification by said user;

storing said any address specification in at least one repository of user information, said at least one repository of user information identifying users that are currently viewing said any address specification;

generating for said user a list of users that are currently viewing said any address specification.

2. The method of claim 1 further comprising the step of:

generating, by said computer program, a graphical user interface (GUI) configured to allow said user to select a collaboration operation and display said list of users currently accessing said any address specification.

3. The method of claim 1 wherein said user information is retrieved from an HTML page generated by an Internet browser executing in said computer system.

4. The method of claim 1 wherein said information for said user includes the user's name and electronic mail address.

5. The method of claim 1 wherein said computer program executes within a browser program executing in said computer system, step of storing said any address specification further comprises the steps of:

said computer program generating a GUI in a display area of said browser program, said GUI including an input field configured to accept said any address specification;

transmitting said address selection to a server upon input of said any address specification in said input field;

said server storing said any address specification in a repository in an entry associated with said user.

6. The method of claim 1 wherein said computer program is an applet written in a platform-independent programming language.

7. The method of claim 6 wherein said platform-independent programming language is the Java programming language.

8. The method of claim 1 wherein said any address specification specifies a Web page.

9. A multi-user awareness and collaboration system comprising:

a server coupled to a computer system, said server configured to maintain a repository of user information, said repository of user information including a user's identification and an address of a page currently being viewed by said user;

a computer program executing in a client computer system, said computer program configured to capture and transmit page requests to said server and display a list of users currently viewing the same page as said user.

10. The system of claim 9 wherein said computer program is a Java applet executing within a browser running in said client computer system, said Java applet is configured to generate a graphical user interface (GUI) configured to display said list of users.

11. The system of claim 10 wherein said GUI further includes an input field for capturing address input of said user.

12. The system of claim 10 wherein said GUI further includes a GUI elements representing selectable collaboration operations.

13 A computer program product comprising:

a computer usable medium having computer readable program code embodied therein for user awareness and collaboration in a computer network environment comprising:

computer readable program code configured to cause a server computer to retain user information for a user of said network environment, said user information including a user identification;

computer readable program code configured to cause a client computer to capture any address specification by said user;

computer readable program code configured to cause said server computer to store said any address specification in at least one repository of user information, said at least one repository of user information identifying users that are currently viewing said page;

computer readable program code configured to cause a server computer to generate for said user a list of users that are currently viewing said any address specification.

14. The computer program product of claim 13 further comprising:

computer readable program code configured to cause said client computer to generate a graphic user interface (GUI) configured to allow said user to select a collaboration operation and display said list of users currently accessing said any address specification.

15. The computer program product of claim 13 wherein said user information is retrieved from an HTML page generated by an Internet browser executing in said client computer.

16. The computer program product of claim 13 wherein said information for said user includes the user's name and electronic mail address.

17. The computer program product of claim 13 wherein said computer program code executes within a browser program executing in said client computer, said computer program code configured to cause said server computer to store said any address specification further comprises:

computer readable program code configured to cause said client to generate a GUI in a display area of said browser program, said GUI including an input field configured to accept said any address specification;

computer readable program code configured to cause said client computer to transmit said any address specification to said server computer upon input of said any address specification in said input field;

computer readable program code configured to cause said server computer to store said any address specification in a repository in an entry associated with said user.

18. The computer program product of claim 13 wherein said computer program code is an applet written in a platform-independent programming language.

19. The computer program product of claim 18 wherein said platform-independent programming language is Java.

20. The computer program product of claim 13 wherein said any address specification specifies a Web page.

21. In a computer system, a method of user collaboration comprising:

registering with a collaboration server;

entering a request for a page of information in a collaboration interface displayed in said computer system as a result of said registering;

viewing in said collaboration interface a list of users currently viewing said page.

22. The method of claim 21 further comprising selecting in said collaboration interface a collaboration operation to initiate a collaboration operation with said users currently viewing said page.

23. The method of claim 22 wherein said collaboration operation comprises identifying one of said users as a master user, said method further comprising displaying in said computer system each page displayed in said master user's computer system.

24. The method of claim 21 wherein said collaboration interface is generated by at least one applet running in a browser.

25. The method of claim 21 wherein said registering with a collaboration server further comprises entering user information in a registration page.

26. The method of claim 21 wherein said registering with a collaboration server further comprises:

storing registration information in said computer system;

transmitting said stored registration information to said collaboration server.

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