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(54) Title: SYSTEM AND METHOD FOR GUIDED MEDIA SEQUENCES

(57) Abstract: A system and a method for guiding at least one user through a sequence of media units, with added commentary, termed herein a "String". A String is a sequential, interactive, media enhanced Web experience which dramatically improves the end-user experience for viewing (preferably pre-authored) sequential displays of media units. Examples of these different types of media units include, but are not limited to, still images, video data, audio data, text, animation and Web pages. A preferred embodiment of the present invention is of Strings which are constructed of a sequence of Web pages, as such a sequence of media units may optionally incorporate any other types of media which are compatible with Web pages. Also, optionally a trigger may be activated to cause an action to occur, which is optionally outside the guided sequence.

SYSTEM AND METHOD FOR GUIDED MEDIA SEQUENCES

FIELD OF THE INVENTION

The present invention relates to a system and a method for guided media sequences or strings, and in particular, to such a system and method in which a user sequentially views a plurality of stops, composed of media units with an optional accompanying commentary, which combine to form the string. The media sequences may optionally be manually guided, but alternatively are automatically sequentially displayed. A triggered action may also optionally be used in order to break a sequential display of the stops by causing an action to be performed which is outside of the linear sequence.

BACKGROUND OF THE INVENTION

Web pages are an example of a format of information which is available for display on a computational device through a network, such as the Internet for example. Static Web pages may be used to convey various types of information, such as promotional information for products, or branding information for particular companies and/or products of those companies.

In addition, other types of media units may also be available through a network such as the Internet. Examples of these media units include, but are not limited to, streaming video and audio data, graphic images, animation, text, word processing documents, other forms for entering information by a user, spreadsheets and various types of interactive displays. These media units, which are frequently available to a company as legacy data, should also be included within any type of guided presentation, but are currently not included.

Various business processes would benefit from enhanced presentations or displays of sequential information, particularly displays which are not limited to Web pages. For example, sales processes would benefit from such clear, interactive and intuitive presentations, as the user could enter information and be guided through the entire process. Unfortunately, such presentations are not currently available, even through dynamic Web pages.

Without such clear and intuitive presentations, however, uncompleted transactions may occur, particularly for difficult or complex product offerings. For example, these offerings may be provided by banks, insurance providers, brokerage firms and other financial institutions. Uncompleted transactions may prove very expensive and frustrating for these types of firms and companies. Current attempts to find solutions to these uncompleted transactions include process redesign, which is expensive, time consuming and disruptive to customers; and the addition of

certain interactive features, such as a "chat" feature with an on-line sales representative. However, neither attempted solution fully addresses this problem.

SUMMARY OF THE INVENTION

The background art does not teach or suggest a solution for guiding the user through a sequence of a plurality of media units with additional commentary. The background art also does not teach or suggest the use of media units which optionally include Web pages with other types of media units within the guided sequence. The background art also does not teach or suggest a solution for using legacy information to provide an intuitive, interactive sales process experience for the user.

The present invention overcomes these deficiencies of the background art by providing a system and a method for guiding at least one user through a sequence of a plurality of stops, optionally implemented as media units and preferably with additional commentary, optionally either as an automatic display of a string or alternatively as a "live" display of the string with a human operator. The stops also optionally feature various types of media units integrated into the sequence, such as Web pages, animation, graphic images, and streaming audio and video for example.

The accompanying commentary provides additional information which is related to the subject matter of the stops and/or directly to the media unit(s) of the stops. The guided sequence is executed according to a set of sequence instructions, which may be performed automatically from stored instructions, or alternatively may be entered by a human operator functioning as the guide. The execution of the guided sequence provides the user with a multimedia experience, of which a portion of the experience is optionally provided through the display of one or more Web pages and/or other types of media units. Thus, the user is guided through the sequence of stops, optionally including media units, according to the instructions, and receives additional information from the commentary.

Examples of these different types of media units include, but are not limited to, still images, video data, audio data, text, animation, graphic images, Web pages, word processing documents, other forms for data entry, slide or presentation data, and spreadsheet data.

According to preferred embodiments of the present invention, as an additional option to the pre-defined display sequence, a trigger feature is provided which causes an action to be performed outside of, or apart from, the linear sequence of the display. For example, such an action may enable the user to jump (non-sequentially) to another part of the presentation.

Alternatively, such an action may force the user to perform some process before the presentation continues, such as entering a particular type of information in a form for example.

According to the present invention, there is provided a method for providing a guided sequence through a network to at least one user, the method comprising: providing a set of guided sequence instructions for executing the guided sequence; executing at least one guided sequence instruction from the set of guided sequence instructions to form at least one executed guided sequence instruction; displaying at least one media unit with commentary to the at least one user according to the at least one executed guided sequence instruction; and repeating the providing, executing and displaying at least once to display at least one other media unit with commentary to the at least one user to form the guided sequence.

Hereinafter, the term "network" refers to a connection between any two or more computational devices which permits the transmission of data.

Hereinafter, the term "computational device" includes, but is not limited to, any type of device which is capable of performing computations, including but not limited to: desktop computers, hand-held computers, cellular telephones, enhanced cellular telephones such as WAP-enabled cellular telephones, wearable computers of any sort, and palm-top or PDA (personal data assistant) type devices.

For the present invention, a software application could be written in substantially any suitable programming language, which could easily be selected by one of ordinary skill in the art. The programming language chosen should be compatible with the computational device according to which the software application is executed. Examples of suitable programming languages include, but are not limited to, C, C++ and Java.

In addition, the present invention could be implemented as software, firmware or hardware, or as a combination thereof. For any of these implementations, the functions performed by the method could be described as a plurality of instructions performed by a data processor.

BRIEF DESCRIPTION OF THE DRAWINGS

The invention is herein described, by way of example only, with reference to the accompanying drawings, wherein:

FIG 1. is a schematic block diagram of a system according to the present invention;

FIG. 2 is a flowchart of an illustrative method for presenting the guided sequence of media units according to the present invention;

FIG. 3 is an exemplary GUI display for the guided sequence of Figure 2 according to the present invention;

FIG. 4 is a flowchart of an illustrative method for creating a new String according to the present invention;

FIGS. 5A-5D are exemplary GUI (graphical user interface) displays for the String builder according to the present invention;

FIG. 6 is an exemplary GUI (graphical user interface) for the "WYSIWYG" implementation of the string builder according to the present invention; and

FIG. 7 is a schematic block diagram of one exemplary implementation of the system of Figure 1 according to the present invention.

DESCRIPTION OF THE PREFERRED EMBODIMENTS

The present invention is of a system and a method for guiding at least one user through a sequence of stops obtained through a network, preferably composed of a plurality of media units with added commentary, termed herein a "String". A String is a sequential, interactive, media enhanced Web experience which dramatically improves the end-user experience for viewing (preferably pre-authored) sequential displays of these stops. Examples of these different types of media units for the stops include, but are not limited to, still images, video data, audio data, text, animation, graphic images, Web pages, word processing documents, other forms for data entry, slide or presentation data, and spreadsheet data.

A preferred but illustrative embodiment of the present invention is of Strings which are constructed of a sequence of Web pages, as such a sequence of media units may optionally incorporate any other types of media which are compatible with Web pages.

Each of the components of the string may optionally feature one or more stops. A "stop" is a display of information which preferably includes at least one media unit. If a plurality of media units should be displayed at a particular stop, then more preferably these media units are related in some manner.

According to preferred embodiments of the present invention, as an optional addition to the pre-defined display sequence, a trigger feature is provided which causes an action to be performed outside of, or apart from, the linear sequence of the display. For example, such an action may enable the user to jump (non-sequentially) to another part of the presentation. Alternatively, such an action may force the user to perform some process before the presentation continues, such as entering a particular type of information in a form for example.

According to optional but preferred embodiments of the present invention, the strings are provided according to one of several display options, a live event mode, one-on-one and a private mode (on-demand). A String which is presented according to the live event mode preferably features a live (human) guide, who manually controls and/or otherwise guides the display of the String to one or more end-users. The end-users may optionally present questions to the live guide, who may answer through a variety of communication modes. For example, questions may be given and/or answered through such communication modes as textual chat, messaging and/or e-mail; voice interaction; or live video broadcast. The end-users may also optionally interact through these different communication modes, if a group of a plurality of end-users is present.

The guide is optionally able to control the pace at which the String is displayed, for example by moving the entire group of end-users as one to the next stop, or the next media unit to be displayed. Such live events (or the live mode for displaying Strings) are more preferably scheduled in advance, before the display of the String begins. More preferably, the guide or the author of the String (who are not necessarily the same individual) determines a time and date for each event, and then most preferably promotes the event to the end-users by informing them of the time and date of the live display.

The private (on demand) mode for displaying Strings, on the other hand, preferably allows at least one end-user to display the String in an automatic format, without the manual interaction of a live human guide. Preferably, each individual end-user views such a String separately. More preferably, guide enhancements are available through the String, including but not limited to, pre-recorded guide commentary, pre-authored notes, multiple types of media, and so forth.

The accompanying commentary provides additional information which is related to the subject matter of the media units and/or directly to the media unit itself. The guided sequence is executed according to a set of sequence instructions, which may be performed automatically from stored instructions, or alternatively may be entered by a human operator functioning as the guide. The execution of the guided sequence provides the user with a multimedia experience which includes the display of a sequence of stops, of which a portion of the experience is optionally provided through the display of one or more Web pages and/or other types of media units. The user may optionally ask questions, although these would need to be answered "off-line", at a later time and/or through a different communication mode. Thus, the user is guided through the sequence of media units according to the instructions and receives additional

information from the commentary.

Text may optionally be received from the guide, if present, and/or from another user, if a plurality of users is participating in the guided sequence of media, in the form of chat. Text may also optionally be received from stored messages, previously entered by other users. The guide may also optionally provide broadcast video and/or audio data for the commentary.

The guided sequence may optionally be organized such that the display of the guided sequence of media units is repeated periodically. Alternatively, for a single user, the guided sequence of media units may begin at the initiative of that user. Also alternatively, the guided sequence may be a single predetermined event for a group of users. In addition, the guided sequence may be open to any user, or alternatively, may be open only to one or more select users. These select users may need to enter a password or other identifier in order to join the guided sequence, for example.

One-on-One mode is preferably implemented in a similar manner to the live (guide) mode, except that the session for displaying the String is preferably not scheduled, but rather is always available, or at least is always available when a human guide is present. This mode is preferred for immediately, non-preplanned communication.

According to other preferred embodiments of the present invention, there is provided an authoring tool and environment, in order to permit a user to construct a new sequence of media units, or String. As previously described, a String is a pre-authored, sequential, interactive, media enhanced display. The authoring tool enables a user to construct such a String. First, optionally and preferably, the user registers and then logs into an authoring server. Alternatively, the tool is provided as a stand-alone software program or other stand-alone apparatus. Next, the user may decide to create a new String, or alternatively may choose to edit an existing String.

More specifically, for creating the String with the authoring tool, the user preferably selects the plurality of media events, including the stage of entering an address or other pointer for the location of each media unit, or alternatively uploading the media unit to a particular server. The user also preferably enters accompanying text and/or other types of commentary to the sequence of stops. Once the sequence of stops has been entered, the user is most preferably able to determine the type of display which is to occur, such as automatic or manual, and to optionally schedule the display time.

A session is then preferably created. The session preferably includes any type of control

over the viewing mechanism which is to be made. For example, the String may then optionally be viewed as a scheduled live event, but alternatively may be viewed in private mode or with access to a guide (but not scheduled specifically). Also optionally, the String may be promoted, for example through the Web or alternatively may be more specifically promoted by an invitation, transmitted for example through an e-mail message. The session is then optionally and more preferably analyzed in order to determine the behavior of the user during the session.

Optionally, the user then copies certain code to a Web page, or otherwise adds a pointer to the storage location of the sequence of stops, such that the guided sequence of stops is accessible through the Web page of the user and/or through an e-mail message for example.

The principles and operation of the system and method according to the present invention may be better understood with reference to the drawings and the accompanying description.

Referring now to the drawings, Figure 1 is a schematic block diagram of a system according to the present invention. A system **10** includes at least one, and preferably a plurality of, user computational devices **12** as shown. Each user computational device **12** operates a Web browser **14** for viewing Web pages, as well as other types of media units, for example through the addition of "plug-in" modules. In addition, each user computational device **12** operates a client module **16** according to the present invention for interactions with a guided sequence. Client module **16** is preferably downloaded by the end-user to user computational device **12** before the String or guided media sequence is displayed, although client module **16** is not necessary permanently installed. Client module **16** is thus optionally implemented as a temporarily or permanently installed software program, for example as a C++ based standalone player or alternatively as a Java applet.

Each user computational device **12** is preferably connected to a network **18** such as the Internet for example. Network **18** is also connected to a back-end system **20**. Back-end system **20** provides the support for the functionality of the guided sequence. Back-end system **20** preferably includes a plurality of media servers (not shown) for providing the plurality of media units, which are optionally Web pages for example. Other examples of such media units include but are not limited to, video and audio data, animation, graphic images, text, word processing documents, other forms for data entry, slide or presentation data, and spreadsheet data.

Back-end system **20** may optionally send commands to the media server for determining which media unit is to be displayed by Web browser **14**, such that Web browser **14** itself does not communicate directly with the media server. However, preferably back-end system **20** sends these commands to client module **16**, which then requests the corresponding media units from

the media server, by sending a command which includes the address or pointer to the media unit, optionally with any other required information for requesting the media unit. Client module **16** also preferably sends information about the actions of the user to back-end system **20**. For example, for requesting a Web page, back-end system **20** would send the URL to a Web server.

The information sent by client module **16** preferably obtains such information at least partially from a guided sequence user interface **24**, operated by client module **16**.

In addition, optionally and preferably, the guided sequence is controlled and guided by "live" human operator (not shown), who interacts with back-end system **20** through a guide interface **26**. The human operator is preferably shown both the display being shown through guided sequence user interface **24**, which more preferably includes a display of the human operator through live video broadcasting, and also a preview of an upcoming portion of the guided sequence. In addition, the human operator is preferably also able to enter commands in order to direct and guide the guided sequence. These commands are sent directly to back-end system **20**, and may optionally be used in order to alter the display being shown through guided sequence user interface **24** and/or Web browser **14** of user computational device **12**.

If the human operator is not present, then alternatively a series of instructions is stored at back-end system **20** with regard to the content of the guided sequence. Preferably, the series of instructions includes commands for sequentially displaying a plurality of media units which are optionally Web pages, such that these commands are sent from back-end system **20** to user computational device **12**. The media server in turn sends the requisite media units, such as Web pages for example, to be displayed by Web browser **14** of user computational device **12**, alone or in combination with guided sequence user interface **24**. Thus, back-end system **20** executes a plurality of guided sequence instructions, whether according to commands from the human operator, or alternatively from a set of stored instructions, for automatic operation of the guided sequence.

The functionality of the guided sequence is described in greater detail with regard to Figures 2 and 3 below. Figure 2 is a flowchart of an exemplary method for operating the system of Figure 1 with an illustrative guided sequence. Figure 2 is explained with regard to Figure 3, which is a "screenshot" of the GUI of the present invention, in its particularly preferred embodiment. The illustrative guided sequence is assumed to be guided by a human operator for the purposes of description only and without any intention of being limiting. Also, the end-user is assumed to have downloaded or otherwise obtained the client which is preferably required for viewing the String or guided sequence. The client may optionally be implemented as a "light"

client, such as a Java applet for example, which does not require downloading and/or installation.

In the first stage, the end-user is shown a display which may optionally and preferably include a guide panel, which enables the guide to convey messages. The guide panel preferably includes a guide window for optionally displaying streaming audio and/or video data, or alternatively includes the photograph of the guide. A direct display and/or link may also optionally be provided to display biographical and/or professional information about the guide. A guide may also optionally add special notes regarding the String within this display.

The guide also preferably has a special guide control panel, which is only displayed to the client of the guide.

Another portion of the GUI preferably displays the guided sequence information which concerns the mechanics of the guided sequence itself. For example, a schematic guided sequence location display optionally and preferably shows each "stop", or GUI display, of the guided sequence, more preferably with an indication of the current location of the display of the user within the sequence of the guided sequence. If the guided sequence is intended for a plurality of individuals, then optionally and preferably, a status display indicates whether the guided sequence has actually started. Such a guided sequence for a group of individuals is optionally repeated cyclically, preferably initiating the guided sequence again each time that a predetermined period of time has elapsed. Also optionally, the group of users who are permitted to join the guided sequence may be restricted, for example by requiring the user to enter a password in order to gain entry, such that the guided sequence is "invitation-only".

Other information about the guided sequence, such as the subject matter of the guided sequence, is preferably shown in an informational display, which could include a summary of the information presented during the guided sequence, a rating of the guided sequence and so forth.

Optionally and preferably, the GUI also offers the user additional sources of information, shown as a plurality of channels. For example, the user could choose to view news or entertainment information. Also optionally and preferably, at least one advertisement is displayed through the GUI.

An additional type of preferred display is of a user profile of at least one other end-user participant on the guided sequence. The user profile may optionally include a photograph of the end-user, preferably with a user name and other information about the end-user.

In the second stage, the end-user is shown a display of a second location on the guided

sequence. The guide is preferably able to control the display of each stop through a "follow me" icon, which is selected to move the entire group of one or more end-users to a particular stop (for live guided Strings). More preferably, merely displaying a stop by the guide does not cause the clients of the end-users to automatically display that stop, such that the "follow me" option must be invoked before the clients are forced to display that stop.

As shown with regard to Figure 3, the change of location is preferably reflected in a schematic guided sequence location display **36**. Optionally, the display of the GUI for the new location is performed automatically, according to the instruction of the human operator of this example, whose picture (and/or streaming video data) is shown in a human operator display **28**, or else according to a stored instruction. Alternatively, the user may be requested to cause the change to occur manually, for example by operating a GUI gadget (not shown).

As shown, a note display **32** preferably shows text and/other types of media as part of the commentary of the guided sequence, more preferably as a "pull-down" display which can then optionally be removed from the display of the GUI. Also more preferably, the note display shows text which is specific to the particular portion of the guided sequence being currently displayed through the GUI.

This exemplary illustration of a location on the guided sequence includes at least a portion of a Web page **46**. In addition, an optional but preferred feature of the guided sequence is shown, which is a chat box **48**. The end-user may optionally send a private chat message to the guide, for example.

Optionally and more preferably, the user may receive a media unit, such as Web page **46**, which features highlighting. By "highlighting", it is meant that a contrast is made between a portion of the media unit and the remainder thereof, for example with a blinking character, outlining or coloring with a bright color, animation or any other visual feature which draws attention to a particular portion of the media unit. The highlighting may optionally be added either at the time that the media sequence is authored, or alternatively, or additionally, may be added by the human operator (guide) "on the fly", as the media sequence is being displayed. The specific locations (spot) on the media unit which should receive the highlighting may therefore be chosen either by the author of the media sequence and/or the human operator. The highlighting instruction of specific location on a media unit is preferably delivered as part of the sequence instruction set.

A media player **34** may also optionally be provided, as a separate window as shown, or as a part of the entire interface.

In addition, a feature of the interface which is only available to the human operator controlling the media sequence, or "guide", which is a guide control panel (not shown). The guide may also optionally send a voice message to the group of end-users, after which all group members preferably receive this message through a "pop up" window. As another option, the guide may choose to perform a live broadcast to the clients of the end-users. The live broadcast is more preferably displayed through a separate window, which can optionally and most preferably be dragged to the most convenient place on the client and/or user computational device of the end user.

In the third stage, the guided sequence continues to the next location. Web page **46** of this location of the guided sequence may optionally be obtained from a different Web site than the Web page of the previous location. Since the information concerning the URL of each Web page is sent to the media server from the guided sequence server, rather than being requested from the Web browser, the location of the Web page through the Internet is less important. In addition, optionally and preferably, this location of the guided sequence may feature a media unit which is not a Web page, such as a video clip for example.

In the fourth stage, the guided sequence finishes, although optionally and preferably, the end-user is able to return to at least one previous location of the guided sequence. However, more preferably, the ability to return to this location is limited according to a predetermined period of time, after which access is prevented.

The end-user is optionally and preferably able to set user preferences for controlling the display of the String, more preferably before, during or after the String initiates display. These user preferences optionally and more preferably include but are not limited to, determining whether the guide note is opened automatically at each stop; closing the guide note automatically after a period of time; the size to which the display of the client is automatically opened on the end-user computational device; whether private messages from other clients are accepted; whether guide announcements are accepted; whether pre-caching is enabled, to permit the end-user computational device to start downloading the next stop in the sequence while the previous stop is being displayed; and automatic log-in through the client, in which the client stores the user identifier and password.

Other options preferably enable the end-user to determine whether to view the String under complete control of the guide (more preferably only if enabled by the user who created the String) and also to view a "map" of the String. The map preferably displays the current stop which is being shown, and also information about previous and future stops. In addition, more

preferably the map displays information about other end-users at a particular stop. Also, the end-user is preferably able to determine which other end-users wish to accept a "chat" request, and which are already enagaged in a "chat" session.

Figure 4 is a flowchart of an exemplary method for creating a new guided sequence according to the present invention, which is more preferably provided through a conversion management suite. In the first stage, the author optionally registers with a central authority as a new author. The author preferably provides such information as the name and e-mail address of the author, and optionally an organizational affiliation such as the name of a company, for example. Also optionally and more preferably, the author provides a password, or alternatively is assigned such a password, in order to be able to protect the material created by the author, such as the Strings themselves. Alternatively, the guided sequence could be created with a stand-alone authoring tool. However, for the purposes of description only and without any intention of being limiting, the following method is described with regard to creating the guided sequence through an authoring tool provided through a network, such as the Internet, by a central authority. More preferably, the GUI (graphical user interface) of the authoring tool is provided through a Web page displayed by a Web browser.

In the second stage, the author starts to build a new guided sequence, preferably through an exemplary GUI display which is shown in Figure 5A. As shown, the display starts with the construction of the string in a "String Workshop".

The author preferably starts by entering a name and preferably also a description for the guided sequence. The GUI indicates that the string title and storage location have been selected. The author may then optionally build the string, through the builder (described in the next series of stages) or alternatively with a "WYSIWYG" (what you see is what you get) GUI (described afterward below). The author may also optionally choose to preview the String, either through the full client ("preview" button) or alternatively through the "light" or Java applet-only client ("preview light" button).

In the third stage, the author adds a new "stop" or stage to the guided sequence, as shown in Figure 5B for the String Builder. Detailed information is then added to create the stop, as shown in Figure 5C. Each stop has optional features such as guide media (to be displayed through the guide window on the client, see human operator display **28** of Figure 3), and a guide note (see note display **32** of Figure 3). A title (name) for the stop is also preferably added, more preferably with additional descriptive text, both of which are most preferably displayed with that particular stop.

Each stop preferably features the display of at least one media unit, which is specified according to the address of that media unit. For example, a Web page would be specified according to a URL. Therefore, the author preferably enters at least an address for the at least one media unit, such as the URL. Alternatively, the author may upload at least one media unit to a central server according to the system of the present invention, which would then assign the URL according to the location of the at least one media unit on a storage device which is in communication with that server.

Optionally and preferably, the author may preview each media unit, by requesting that the media unit be retrieved according to the entered address and displayed, in order to be able to check both the accuracy of the address and the availability of the media unit, and also the accuracy of the display for the media unit. Optionally and more preferably, the presence of the media unit at a particular address is verified, for example in order to determine whether a media unit is available at a particular URL. Other aspects of the display of the media unit are also optionally verified.

The author also more preferably adds commentary to the stop, although alternatively the commentary could be added by a live guide "on the fly" during the display of the guided sequence itself. The guide may also be added, or at least a mechanism for interacting with the guide (such as a live video broadcast for example). Such commentary may also optionally only be displayed to the live guide. The commentary may optionally function as part of a story line, in which each stop functions as a chapter in the story, or alternatively may be used to indicate important features in the media unit being displayed, or alternatively in associated display areas, such as the commerce display area.

The author optionally and preferably adds pre-recorded guide media to the String. The pre-recorded guide data are preferably played in the "guide window" or other separate display area of the String player or client. The guide media is preferably added as a streaming media file or files, which may optionally be a streaming audio and/or video file. More preferably, the author previews the streaming media in a display in order to determine whether the streaming media file is being correctly played.

Alternatively, at this stage, the author selects a live human guide, who is then authorized to guide and/or otherwise control the display of the String. The author may optionally add information about the live guide to the description of the String, such as the name of the guide, with a photograph and/or other information about the guide, for example. Such information about the live guide may also optionally be provided to the end-users as part of the promotional

activities for the String (described in greater detail below).

In addition, the author may optionally and preferably choose to cause the guided sequence to pause for a predetermined period of time at the stop, although more preferably, such a delay time is only invoked when the String is being displayed in automatic mode, such as private mode for example. For example, the delay period may optionally be chosen to be from about one minute to about ten minutes.

If the stop is to combine two different types of media units, such as a Web page with a video clip for example, then the author preferably chooses how the two media units are to be displayed together. For example, the video clip could optionally be displayed in a separate window which is laid over the Web page. For the preferred embodiment of the present invention with Web pages, more preferably one or more different types of Web based media such as image, video, audio or flash are optionally added by specifying a URL or other address, or alternatively by selecting this additional media from the media collection of the author creating the String. Most preferably, this media collection is private for the author only, even if it is stored on a central server for a plurality of authors. However, even if the basic type of media unit is not a Web page, preferably other types of media may be combined with a single media unit to form the stop for the String.

Optionally and preferably, other display areas may also be added to the stop. As previously described, additional types of media may optionally be added for display either as part of the main media unit or alternatively as a separate display, for example as a separate "pop-up" window. The author may also choose to create a separate display area for a call for action or other types of interactive displays. This display area may again be displayed as part of the main media unit or alternatively as a separate display, again for example as a separate "pop-up" window.

The "call for action" is preferably added as "action items", which are composed of an image, such as an advertisement for example, and a URL or other address which points to another Web page or other resource for performing the call for action. Furthermore, the author is preferably able to determine whether the additional Web page is displayed in place of, or alternatively in addition to, the particular stop of the String. Such action items may optionally and more preferably be stored in a separate action archive, from which the author may select one or more items for display at each stop of the String.

A triggered stop may also optionally be added. A triggered stop has a trigger which is invoked under certain circumstances, causing a stop to be displayed. The triggered stop is added

through a similar process as that described above for the regular stop, except that the trigger must also be given. Furthermore, the triggered stop is outside the regular sequence for the String.

In the fourth stage, at least one additional stop is preferably added, such that the guided sequence or String has a plurality of stops. Each such stop is preferably added as previously described.

In the fifth stage, an initial stop is optionally created, which is the entry point to the guided sequence. This initial stop may optionally also be created first, at the beginning of the string building process. For a group of end-users viewing the String as part of a manually guided "string" or process with a "live" guide, such an entry point optionally enables all of the end-users to "meet" in a virtual meeting place. Alternatively and preferably, the first stop of the String may function as the entry point to the guided sequence if no separate media unit is displayed for this purpose. In any case, the author may optionally enter a "welcome message" to be displayed to the end-users upon initiation of the String or guided sequence, preferably with selected color(s) and/or logo.

In the sixth stage, optionally a final stop is created, which is the exit point to the guided sequence or String. This final stop may optionally also be created first, at the beginning of the string building process, in the middle or at the end. The final stop may more preferably be used to enable the author to summarize the String content to the end-users, and also optionally and more preferably to offer the end-users another opportunity to view one or more of the action items which were offered during the display of the String. Also alternatively, the last stop of the String may function as the exit point to the guided sequence if no separate media unit is displayed for this purpose. In any case, the author may optionally enter a "closing message" to be displayed to the end-users upon completion of the String or guided sequence, preferably with selected color(s) and/or logo.

In the seventh stage, optionally and preferably, the author views information about the entire guided sequence of media units. For example, the author may optionally choose to rearrange the order of the stops. The author may also optionally choose to add a trigger and associated action, for example. Examples of triggers include but are not limited to, selecting a particular URL and/or requesting a particular URL with a particular prefix or keyword. Examples of actions include, but are not limited to, moving to a particular stop or displaying a particular stop.

In the eighth stage, the author stores the completed String at the String Warehouse. At

this stage, the initial authoring process is complete. The author may then optionally select the newly created String or a different String for the next stage from the String Warehouse, which holds one or more folders, each of which may optionally contain a String to be selected.

Optionally and more preferably, after this entire process has been completed, the author receives a confirmation display, such as a Web page which contains a message, confirming that the actions of the author have been accepted.

In the ninth stage, the author preferably creates a session with the guided sequence (after storage in the String Warehouse), for example by scheduling the session as a live guided sequence with a live guide ("conference sessions"), or alternatively as an automatically executed guided sequence ("on demand sessions"), or also alternatively as a "one-on-one" session (non-scheduled live guided sequence). Figure 5D shows an exemplary GUI for selecting such a session. If scheduled as a fixed event, for example for live display with a live guide, more preferably the String is scheduled for display at a particular time and date. The author may also optionally control the type of client which is to be used, such as a light client (Java applet) or a regular installed client, as well as whether the media should be preloaded.

In the tenth stage, the author then distributes information about the session for the guided sequence, for example with an advertisement which is displayed on a Web page, or alternatively with an e-mail message. Either type of promotion may optionally include a link or pointer to the session. In addition, the author may also optionally choose to protect the session with a password, such that only end-users who have the password are able to view the String.

The author may also optionally choose to offer alternatives to the guided live mode if the link or pointer has been "clicked on" or otherwise selected before the session has started. If these end-users try to enter the event, before time, a window may optionally be displayed, to explain that the String has not yet started. The author may then choose to offer e-mail reminders and/or may enable these end-users to enter the String in the private mode.

In the eleventh stage, the author may optionally and preferably perform one or more activities after the String has been created and/or displayed. For example, the author may optionally perform an analysis of the String after a display (as a session), as well as of the particular session, in order to determine the behavior of the end-users. The author preferably specifies such information as a date or dates, the name of the String to be analyzed, and the type of report to be created. In return, the author is preferably able to receive such information as the number of end-users who viewed the String, the average amount of time spent at each stop (particularly for automatically displayed guided sequences) and the percentage of end-users who

selected one or more action items. Other optional but preferred reports include, but are not limited to, a report for all questions which were sent to the guide during the String, to which the author may then preferably respond; the most popular pointers or links, such as URLs, which were selected by the end-user while viewing the String; and also determining how frequently a particular URL was reached from the client.

In order for such an analysis to be supported, optionally and more preferably, the client or player software at the user computational device logs information for the later analysis process, such as information about user activities, and sends this information to a central server.

The author may also optionally and preferably edit one or more aspects of the String, more preferably even after the String has been scheduled and/or displayed once. However, this requires the author to return to the String Builder, in order to be able to alter the String. For example, the author may optionally wish to edit the String to temporarily remove a portion of a stop (such as a particular media unit) or even an entire stop from the String. This type of editing may also optionally be used to create a new String from an existing String. More preferably, these changes are not reflected in the String as displayed to the end-user until they are activated by the author (for example, by being placed in a session).

Figure 6 is an exemplary GUI (graphical user interface) for the "WYSIWYG" implementation of the string builder according to the present invention. This GUI preferably contains all of the features of the client GUI for Figure 3, but in addition, features buttons or other GUI "gadgets" to enable the author to add or alter content to the String. These features are preferably added to a string builder panel **100** (shown at the left). String builder panel **100** optionally and preferably features a string title **110**, a stop adding button **120**, a stop editing element **130**, a stop sorting element **140** and a URL adding element **150**. One advantage of this implementation is that the author can immediately view the additions and/or changes to the String as they are made.

Figure 7 is a schematic block diagram of a preferred embodiment of a portion of Figure 1, showing the client module and the server of Figure 1 in more detail. As shown, client module **16** interacts with the end-user as part of system **10**. Web browser **14** is optionally used for providing the authoring tool GUI (graphical user interface), for enabling the string to be created and/or managed. In this situation, client module **16** is preferably used for previewing created and/or edited strings. Both client module **16** and the optional Web browser **14** are in communication with back-end system **20** of Figure 1, more preferably through user computational device **12** (not shown; see Figure 1) which is connected to network **18** such as the

Internet for example.

As previously described, client module **16** is optionally implemented as a temporarily or permanently installed software program, for example as a C++ based standalone player or alternatively as a Java applet.

Back-end system **20** handles communication between client modules **16**, sends instructions to client modules **16**, and also preferably handles other tasks which are related to the guided display of a media sequence.

Back-end system **20** more preferably features a Web server **50**, for providing services related to the preferred implementation of the present invention. Each Web server **50** preferably operates a Web Application **52**, which preferably provides the GUI for creating, managing and analyzing Strings. Web Application **52** optionally and preferably implements a basic three-tier architecture, for maximum security of the data of the users.

Web Application **52** then preferably supports three additional server modules, a builder module **54**, a scheduler module **56** and an analyzer module **58**. Builder module **54** optionally and preferably supports the construction of Strings, including the provision of a GUI (graphical user interface) to the user for selecting and/or entering information or items to construct the String. Scheduler module **56** optionally and preferably enables the user to schedule the display of a String to client modules **16**. Analyzer module **58** then preferably collects information about the display of the String, including the number of client modules **16** receiving the display and so forth.

In addition, back-end system **20** preferably also includes a communication server **60**, for handling live session communication during the display of a String. Whenever a live session is initiated, communication server **60** is informed of the participating end-users in this specific session, or more specifically, of their client modules **16**. Communication server **60** preferably then routes the messages of these client modules **16**, thereby more preferably supporting both chat messages among client modules **16** and guide/audience command messages (e.g. follow me, guide announcements, and so forth).

Back-end system **20** also preferably includes a matching server **62**, for determining which communication server **60** handles a particular client according to a group to which the client belongs, and a logging server **64**. Logging server **64** more preferably constantly, or at least intermittently, receives detailed information about end-user activity sent by each client module **16**. This information is then preferably sent to a database **66**.

Back-end system **20** also preferably includes a control-tower server **68** for controlling

and coordinating the display of Strings and other related activities. Control-tower server **68** preferably also controls the initiation of the display of scheduled Strings.

While the invention has been described with respect to a limited number of embodiments, it will be appreciated that many variations, modifications and other applications of the invention may be made.

WHAT IS CLAIMED IS:

1. A method for providing a guided sequence to at least one user, the method comprising:

providing a set of guided sequence instructions for executing the guided sequence;

executing at least one guided sequence instruction from said set of guided sequence instructions to form at least one executed guided sequence instruction;

displaying at least one media unit with commentary to the at least one user according to said at least one executed guided sequence instruction; and

repeating said providing, executing and displaying at least once to display at least one other media unit with commentary to the at least one user to form the guided sequence.

2. The method of claim 1, wherein the guided sequence is provided through a network.

3. The method of claims 1 or 2, wherein at least one of said media units is a Web page.

4. The method of claims 1 or 2, wherein at least one of said media units is selected from the group consisting of a still image, video data, audio data, text, streaming media data, word processing document, spreadsheet document and animation.

5. The method of any of claims 1-4, wherein said executing is performed by a human operator, such that said human operator controls the guided sequence.

6. The method of claim 5, wherein said commentary is provided by said human operator.

7. The method of claims 5 or 6, wherein said commentary is in a form selected from the group consisting of text and voice data.

8. The method of any of claims 5-7, wherein said human operator determines when

each media unit is displayed.

9. The method of any of claims 5-7, wherein the at least one user at least partially controls display of at least one media unit.

10. The method of claim 1, wherein said executing is performed automatically from a stored set of guided sequence instructions.

11. The method of claim 10, wherein an individual user at least partially controls when each media unit is displayed.

12. The method of claims 10 or 11, wherein commentary is pre-recorded.

13. The method of claim 12, wherein said commentary is selected from the group consisting of voice data and text.

14. The method of any of claims 1-13, wherein providing said set of guided sequence instructions further comprises providing a combined interface for displaying said media unit with said commentary.

15. The method of claim 14, wherein said commentary is in a form of text, said text being displayed through said combined interface.

16. The method of claim 15, wherein said commentary is in a form selected from the group consisting of video data, audio data and graphic data.

17. The method of claim 14, wherein the guided sequence is a group guided sequence for a plurality of users, and at least one of said plurality of users sends at least one text message to at least one other user, said at least one text message being displayed by said combined interface.

18. The method of any of claims 1-17, wherein each display to the at least one user is a location on the guided sequence, and said combined interface displays a map for showing a

current location of the at least one user on the guided sequence, said map also showing at least one other location of the guided sequence.

19. The method of any of claims 1-18, further comprising:

providing an action item for an interaction with the at least one user.

20. The method of claim 19, wherein selecting said interaction by the at least one user causes an additional Web page to be displayed for said interaction.

21. The method of any of claims 1-20, wherein said set of guided sequence instructions and said at least one media unit are provided by an author.

22. The method of claim 21, wherein said author builds the guided sequence with at least one stop, said at least one stop featuring at least one media unit, and commentary.

23. The method of claims 21 or 22, wherein said author analyzes the guided sequence after being viewed by the user.

24. The method of claim 1, further comprising:

activating a trigger; and

causing an action to occur.

25. The method of claim 24, wherein said action is outside the guided sequence.

Figure 1

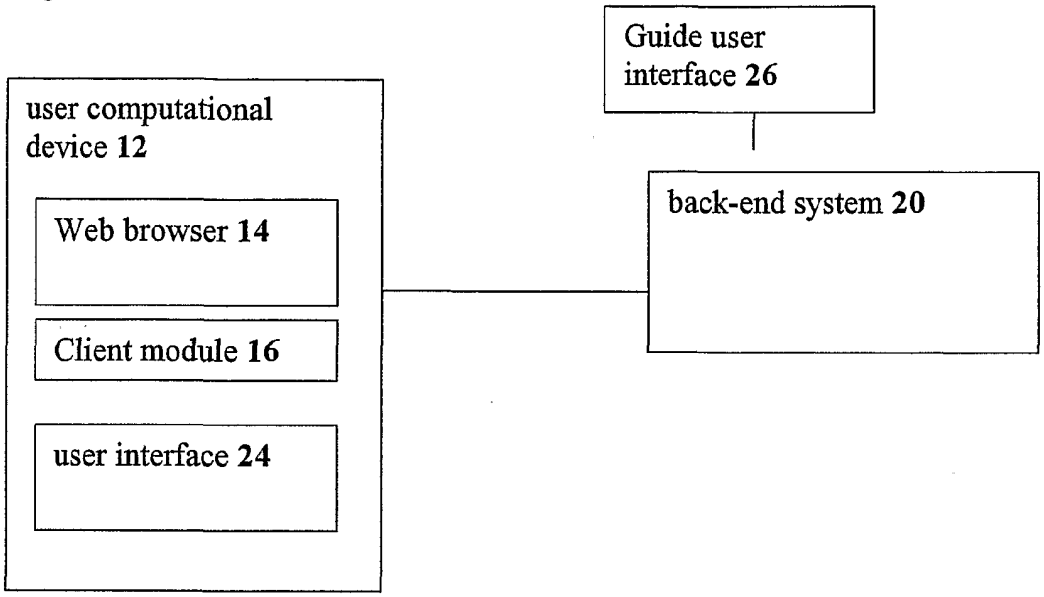

Guide user interface 26
user computational device 12
Web browser 14
Client module 16
user interface 24
back-end system 20

Figure 2

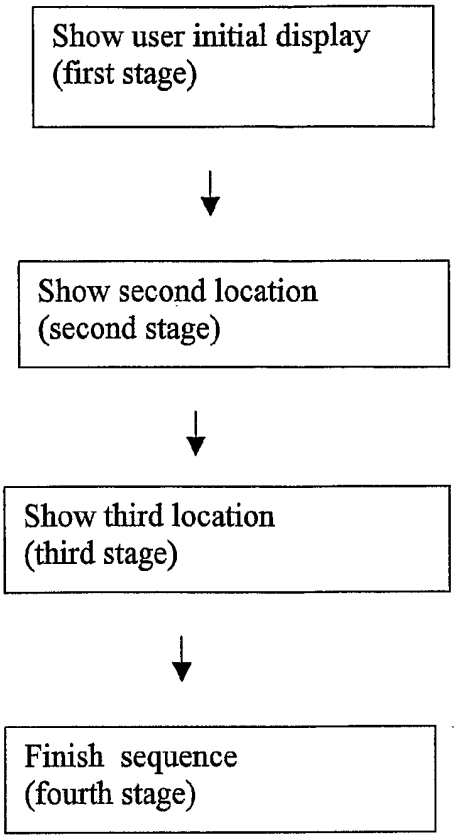

Show user initial display
(first stage)
Show second location
(second stage)
Show third location
(third stage)
Finish sequence
(fourth stage)

Figure 3

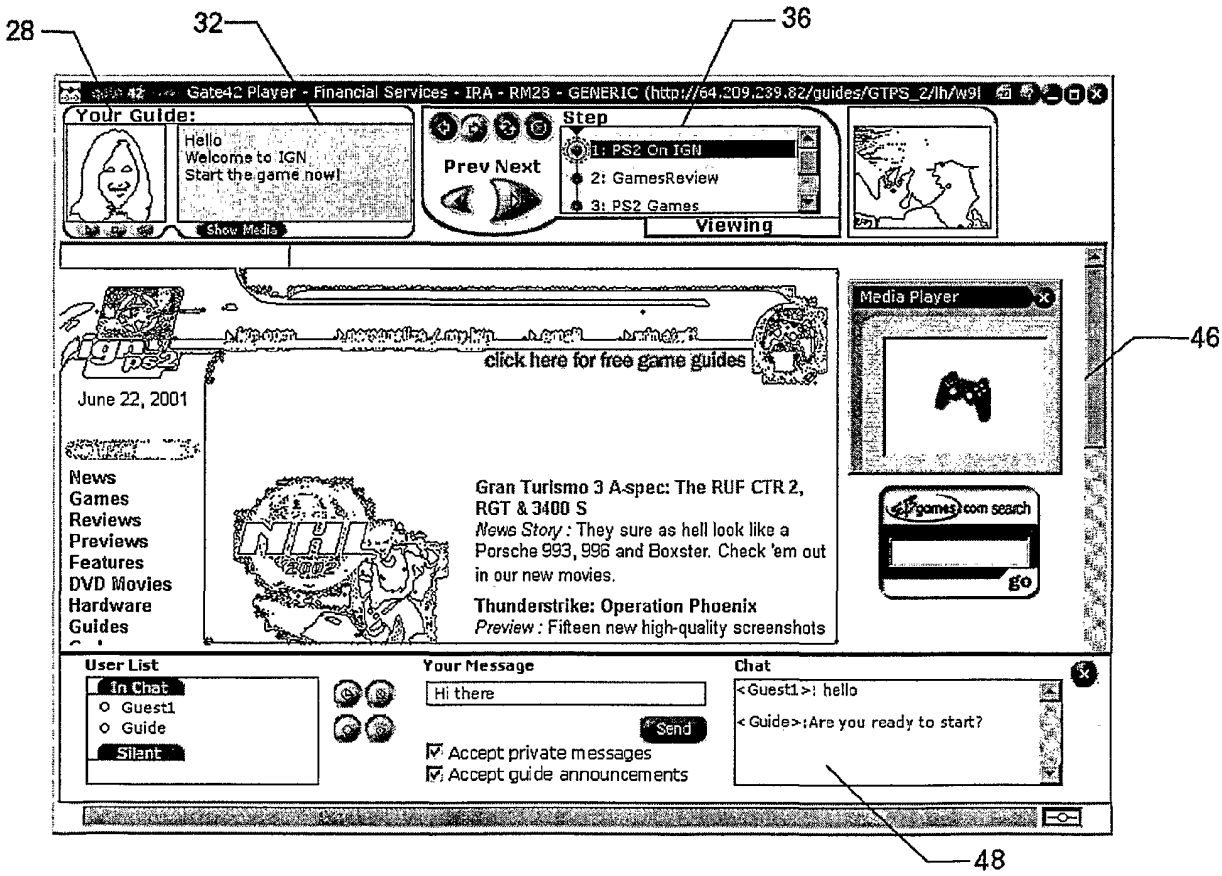

28
32
36
Gate42 Player - Financial Services - IRA - RM28 - GENERIC (http://64.209.239.82/guides/GTPS_2/lh/w9l
Your Guide:
Hello
Welcome to IGN
Start the game now!
Show Media
Prev Next
Step
1: PS2 On IGN
2: GamesReview
3: PS2 Games
Viewing
Media Player
click here for free game guides
June 22, 2001
News
Games
Reviews
Previews
Features
DVD Movies
Hardware
Guides
Gran Turismo 3 A-spec: The RUF CTR 2, RGT & 3400 S
News Story : They sure as hell look like a Porsche 993, 996 and Boxster. Check 'em out in our new movies.
Thunderstrike: Operation Phoenix
Preview : Fifteen new high-quality screenshots
gamesdotcom search
go
46
User List
In Chat
Guest1
Guide
Silent
Your Message
Hi there
Send
Accept private messages
Accept guide announcements
Chat
<Guest1>: hello
<Guide>:Are you ready to start?
48

Figure 4

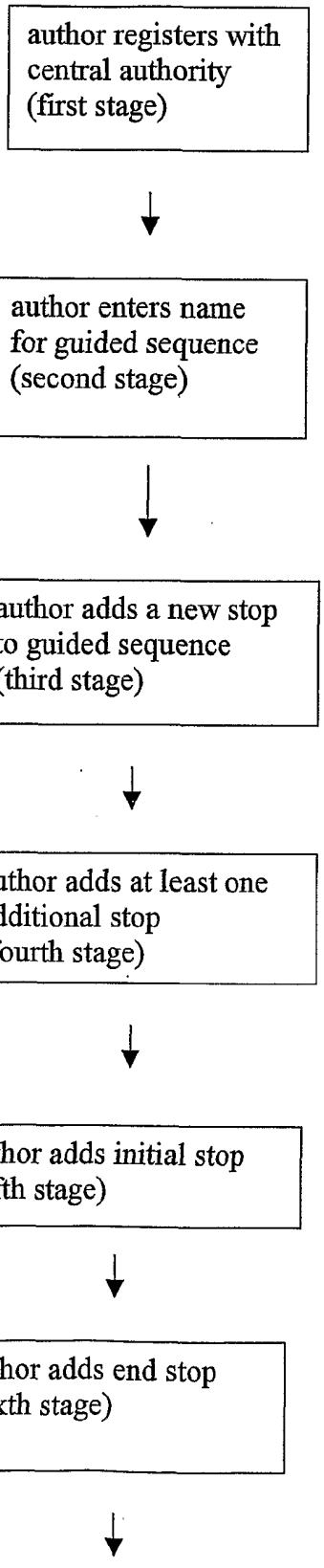

author registers with central authority (first stage)
author enters name for guided sequence (second stage)
author adds a new stop to guided sequence (third stage)
author adds at least one additional stop (fourth stage)
author adds initial stop (fifth stage)
author adds end stop (sixth stage)

Figure 4 (con't)

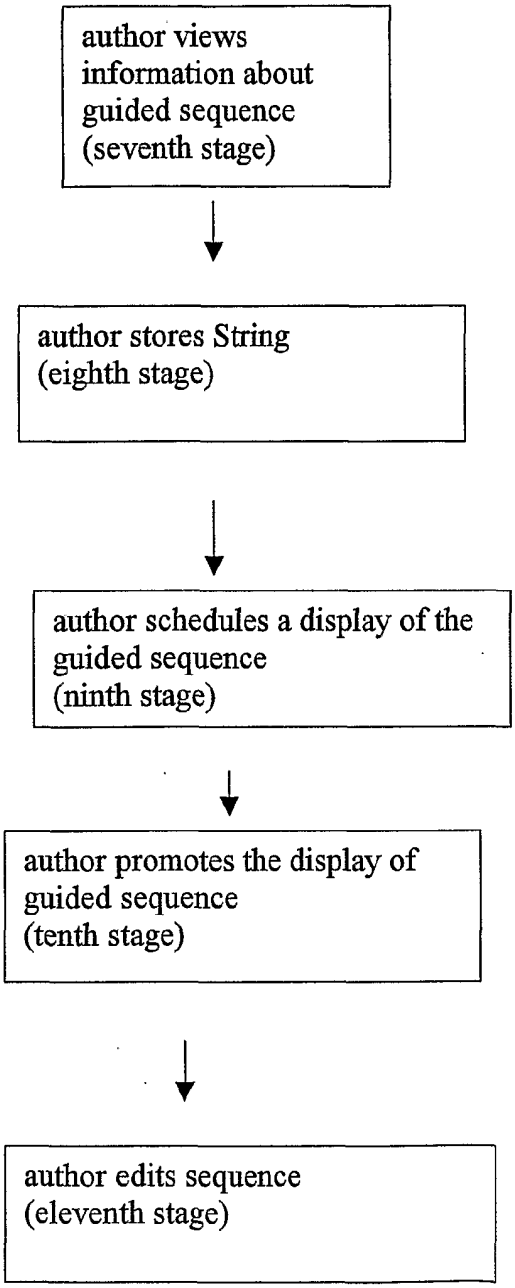
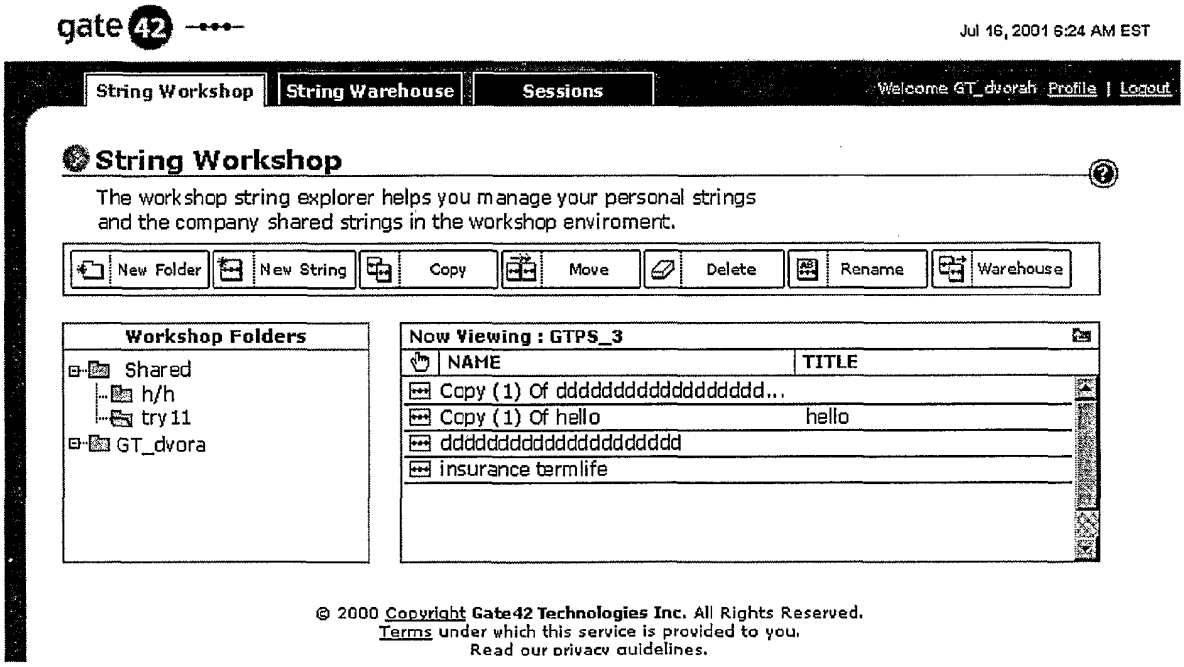


Figure 5A


gate 42
Jul 16, 2001 6:24 AM EST
String Workshop
String Warehouse
Sessions
Welcome GT_dvorah Profile | Logout
String Workshop
The workshop string explorer helps you manage your personal strings and the company shared strings in the workshop enviroment.
New Folder
New String
Copy
Move
Delete
Rename
Warehouse
Workshop Folders
Shared
h/h
try11
GT_dvora
Now Viewing : GTPS_3
NAME
TITLE
Copy (1) Of ddddddddddddddddd...
Copy (1) Of hello
hello
ddddddddddddddddddd
insurance termlife
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Read our privacy guidelines.

Figure 5B

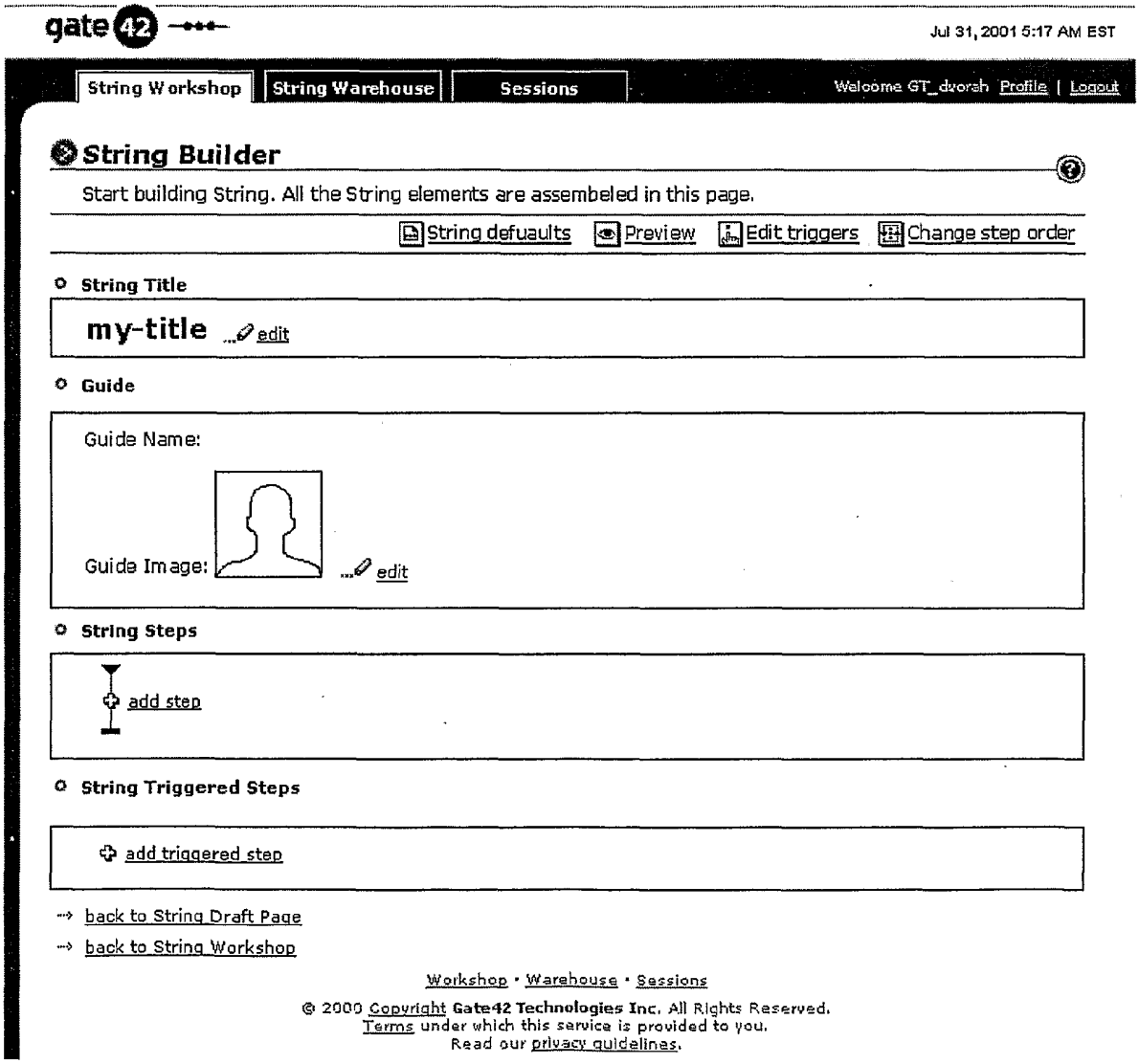
gate 42
Jul 31, 2001 5:17 AM EST
String Workshop
String Warehouse
Sessions
Welcome GT_dvorah Profile | Logout
String Builder
Start building String. All the String elements are assembeled in this page.
String defuaults
Preview
Edit triggers
Change step order
String Title
my-title edit
Guide
Guide Name:
Guide Image:
edit
String Steps
add step
String Triggered Steps
add triggered step
back to String Draft Page
back to String Workshop
Workshop • Warehouse • Sessions
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Figure 5C

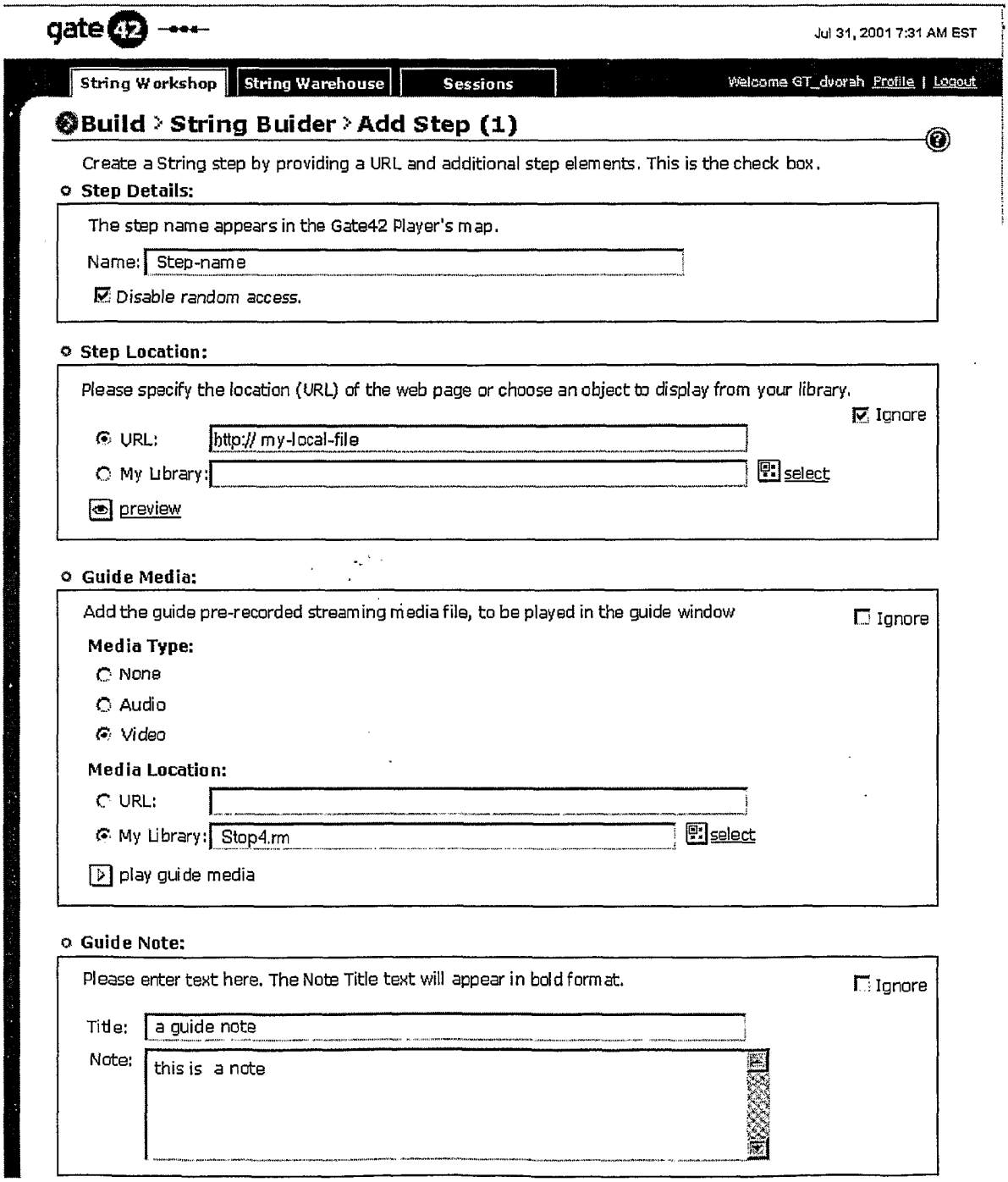

gate 42
Jul 31, 2001 7:31 AM EST
String Workshop
String Warehouse
Sessions
Welcome GT_dvorah Profile | Logout
Build > String Buider > Add Step (1)
Create a String step by providing a URL and additional step elements. This is the check box.
Step Details:
The step name appears in the Gate42 Player's map.
Name: Step-name
Disable random access.
Step Location:
Please specify the location (URL) of the web page or choose an object to display from your library.
Ignore
URL: http:// my-local-file
My Library:
select
preview
Guide Media:
Add the guide pre-recorded streaming media file, to be played in the guide window
Ignore
Media Type:
None
Audio
Video
Media Location:
URL:
My Library: Stop4.rm
select
play guide media
Guide Note:
Please enter text here. The Note Title text will appear in bold format.
Ignore
Title: a guide note
Note: this is a note

Figure 5C (cont')

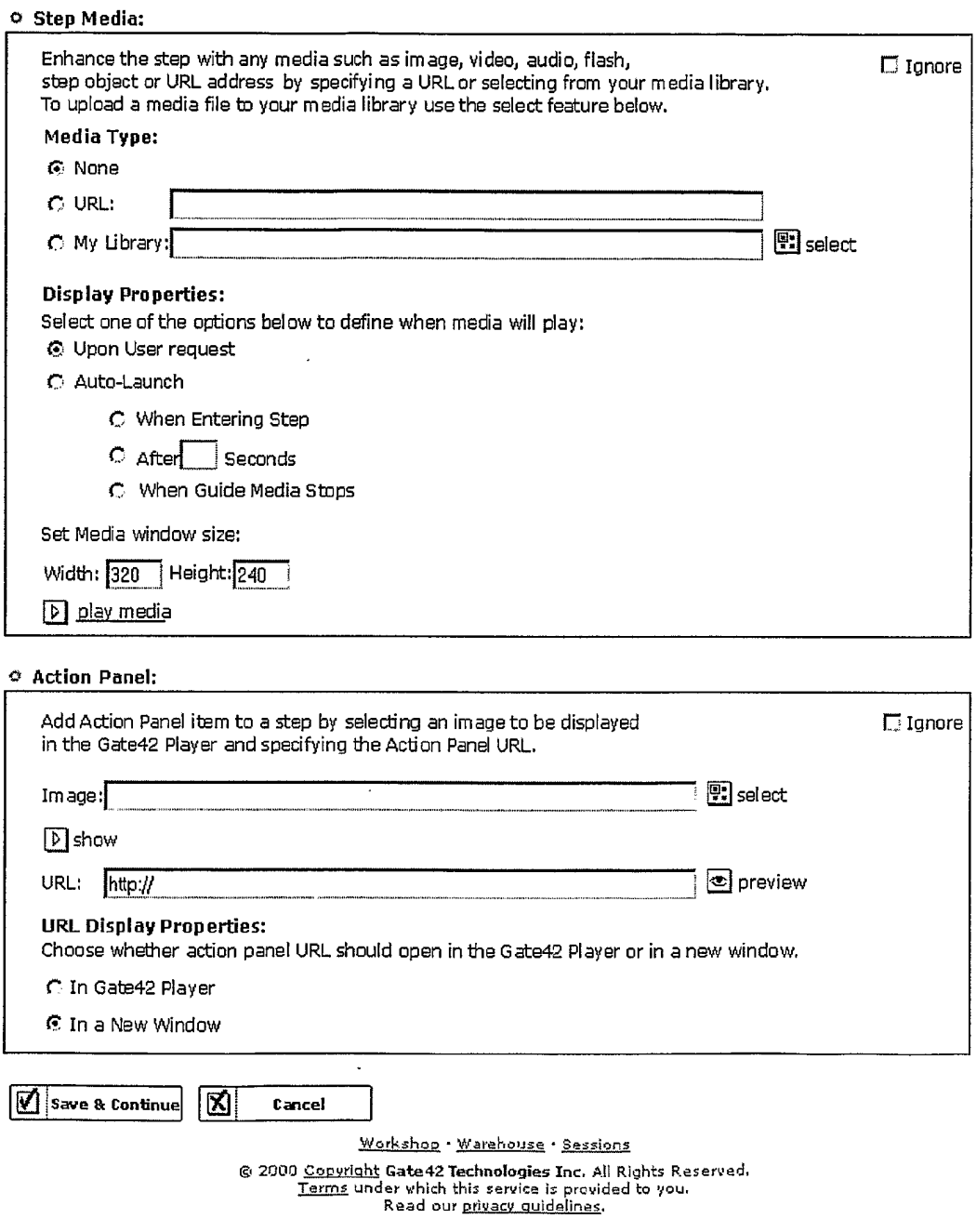


Figure 5D

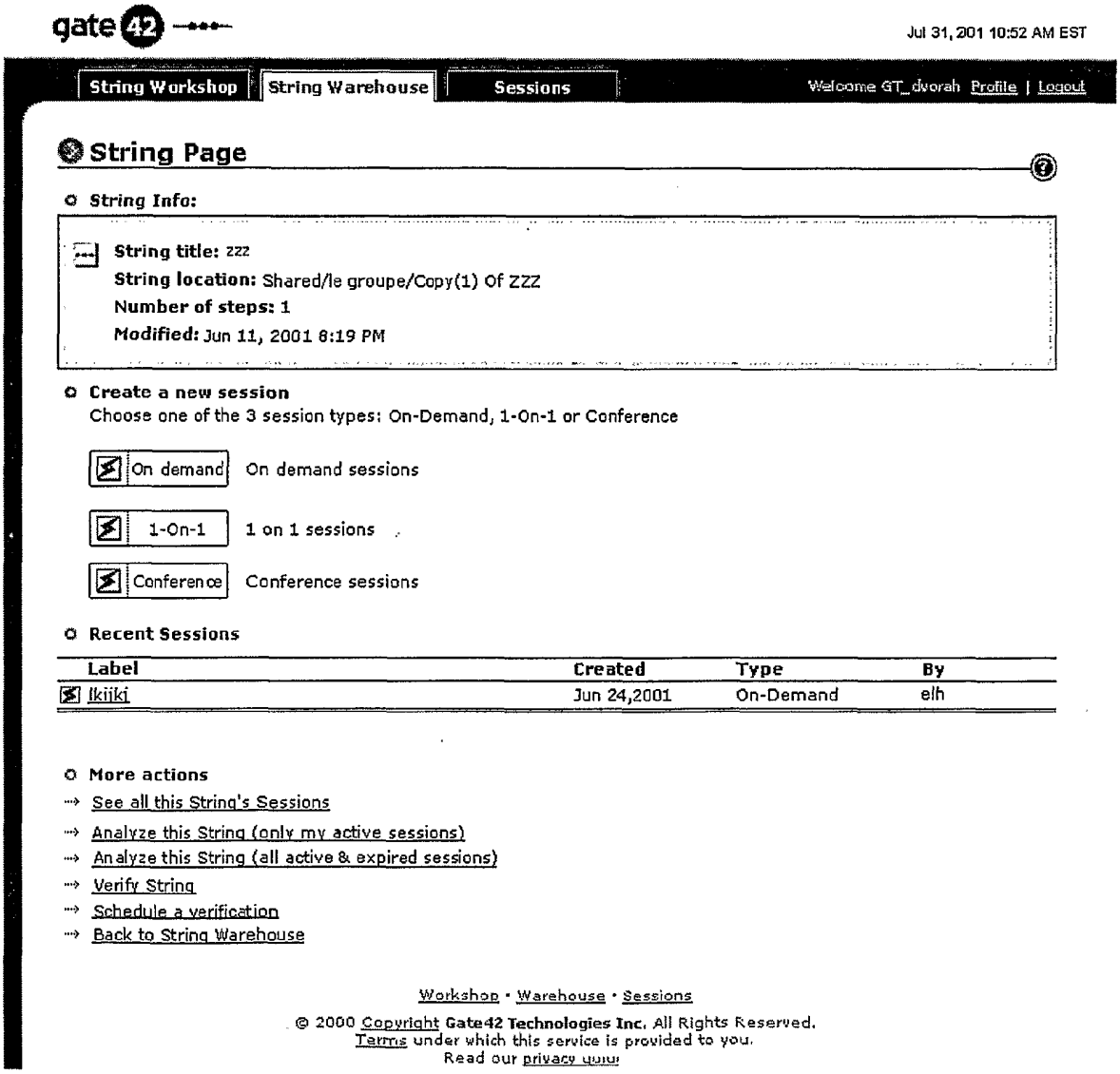

gate 42
Jul 31, 201 10:52 AM EST
String Workshop
String Warehouse
Sessions
Welcome GT_dvorah Profile | Logout
String Page
String Info:
String title: zzz
String location: Shared/le groupe/Copy(1) Of ZZZ
Number of steps: 1
Modified: Jun 11, 2001 8:19 PM
Create a new session
Choose one of the 3 session types: On-Demand, 1-On-1 or Conference
On demand
On demand sessions
1-On-1
1 on 1 sessions
Conference
Conference sessions
Recent Sessions
Label
Created
Type
By
Ikiiki
Jun 24,2001
On-Demand
elh
More actions
See all this String's Sessions
Analyze this String (only my active sessions)
Analyze this String (all active & expired sessions)
Verify String
Schedule a verification
Back to String Warehouse
Workshop · Warehouse · Sessions
© 2000 Copyright Gate42 Technologies Inc. All Rights Reserved.
Terms under which this service is provided to you.
Read our privacy polic

Figure 6

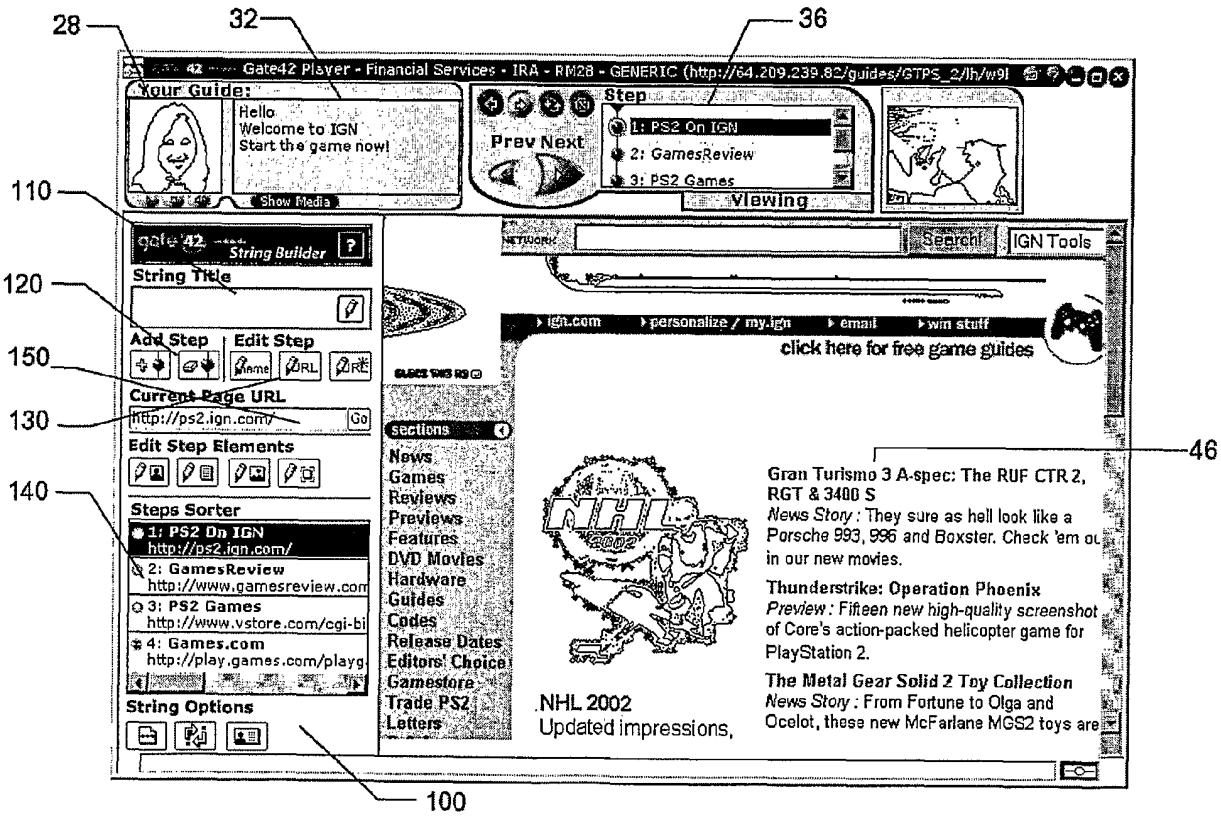
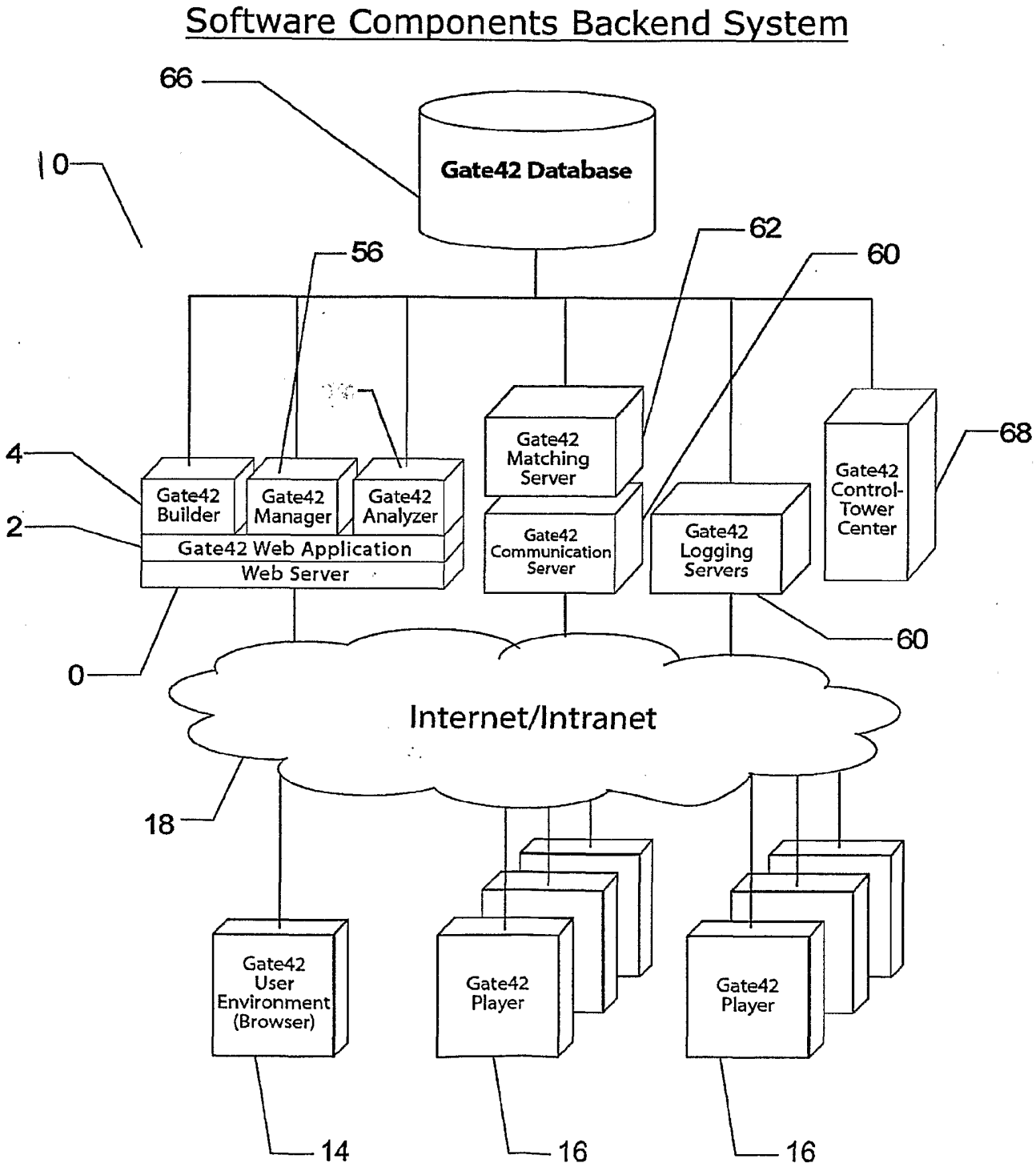

28
32
36
110
120
150
130
140
46
100
Gate42 Player - Financial Services - IRA - RM28 - GENERIC (http://64.209.239.82/guides/GTPS_2/lh/w9l
Your Guide:
Hello
Welcome to IGN
Start the game now!
Show Media
Step
Prev Next
1: PS2 On IGN
2: GamesReview
3: PS2 Games
Viewing
String Builder
String Title
Add Step
Edit Step
Current Page URL
http://ps2.ign.com/
Go
Edit Step Elements
Steps Sorter
1: PS2 On IGN
http://ps2.ign.com/
2: GamesReview
http://www.gamesreview.com
3: PS2 Games
http://www.vstore.com/cgi-bi
4: Games.com
http://play.games.com/playg
String Options
Search
IGN Tools
ign.com
personalize / my.ign
email
win stuff
click here for free game guides
sections
News
Games
Reviews
Previews
Features
DVD Movies
Hardware
Guides
Codes
Release Dates
Editors' Choice
Gamestore
Trade PS2
Letters
NHL 2002
Updated impressions,
Gran Turismo 3 A-spec: The RUF CTR 2, RGT & 3400 S
News Story: They sure as hell look like a Porsche 993, 996 and Boxster. Check 'em ou in our new movies.
Thunderstrike: Operation Phoenix
Preview: Fifteen new high-quality screenshot of Core's action-packed helicopter game for PlayStation 2.
The Metal Gear Solid 2 Toy Collection
News Story: From Fortune to Olga and Ocelot, these new McFarlane MGS2 toys are

Figure 7


Software Components Backend System
66
Gate42 Database
10
56
62
60
68
4
2
0
Gate42 Builder
Gate42 Manager
Gate42 Analyzer
Gate42 Web Application
Web Server
Gate42 Matching Server
Gate42 Communication Server
Gate42 Logging Servers
Gate42 Control-Tower Center
60
Internet/Intranet
18
Gate42 User Environment (Browser)
Gate42 Player
Gate42 Player
14
16
16